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AT GRIPS WITH
EVEREST

ALSO BY STANLEY SNAITH

PROSE

THE CHILDREN'S LONDON PAGEANT
MEN AGAINST PERIL
ALPINE ADVENTURE

POETRY

FIELDFARING
GREEN LEGACY
STORM HARVEST
THE INN OF NIGHT

AT GRIPS WITH EVEREST

By

STANLEY SNAITH

Foreword by

T. HOWARD SOMERVELL

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Member of Everest Expeditions

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LONDON, N.17

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TO THE MEMORY OF TWO WHOSE NAMES
ARE INSEPARABLY LINKED
WITH EVEREST'S—

GEORGE LEIGH-MALLORY
ANDREW IRVINE

FIRST EDITION 1937
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FOREWORD

FROM the wild and lovely Himalaya mountains within four hundred miles of Everest I write with pleasure this foreword to a book I have not seen or read. But the author is a man of my own town amongst the mountains of the English Lake District, so I expect the book is all right. Quite a number of books have been written about the Everest Expeditions, some of them good, some bad, but this is the first, as far as I know, that has been written especially for young people. I think it is a good thing that boys and girls should have a chance of reading about these expeditions in which we tiny mortals try to conquer the great heights of the Himalayas. Nowadays we are so often apt to ask what is the use of this, that, or the other, and to think of life in terms of money or material happiness and prosperity. It is good to be able to get away from this sort of thought, away into the places where men and women are trying to do these difficult and dangerous things for the sake of pure adventure. Nobody will get any benefit or any prosperity when Everest is finally climbed—as I am sure it will be, some day. But a task like the climbing of big mountains calls forth all that is best and strongest in the spirit of man. In such expeditions there is no room for selfishness or swank ; you are a member of a team and have got to play your part, whatever it may be, in order that the team may win. The people who look after stores and camps ; those like Mallory, Irvine, Kellas, and the porters who were killed on Everest in 1922 : those who do surveying and photography : each one helps the team in his own way, and it is on their shoulders, so to speak, that the conquest of the mountains will one day be made.

FOREWORD

Other great peaks like Kamet and Nanda Devi have been climbed successfully by hard going and good, unselfish team-work, and I hope that some of the boys and girls who read this book may one day come and try their strength against these mighty mountains.

The climbing of Everest is perhaps the hardest task with which Nature has ever challenged man ; may the spirit of man always be ready to respond to this challenge. Without risk and adventure there can be no progress in the world. Without unselfishness and sacrifice there can be no happiness worth the name.

T. HOWARD SOMERVELL.

PREFACE

THIS book gives an outline—in the available space it could be nothing more—of the attempts to climb Mount Everest, the highest mountain in the world, and some of her sister peaks. No mountains are so grim yet so beautiful, so uncompromising yet so alluring, as the Himalaya. Guarded by ramparts of rock and ice, weaponed with blizzards and devastating avalanches, they stand as the last strongholds of nature. It is this which is the secret of their fascination, of their power to exalt man to noble efforts. They are a testing ground of character. He who would pit himself against these giants must be prepared to suffer and even perish. Yet the call of adventure is irresistible, and into the luxuriant valleys at their feet—aloof from human intrusion since the dawn of time—came climbers eager for battle. The flower of British and continental mountaineering, they struggled and endured, were repulsed and yet achieved, and won for themselves unfading names. If this book helps, however modestly, to bring home to readers—including young readers—the example and inspiration of these enterprises, it will have served its purpose. And it is hoped that the account of the Houston flying expedition—a gallant and brilliant exploit which came within a hair's-breadth of disaster—will not be deemed out of place in a book of which heroism is the keynote.

Readers desirous of extending their acquaintance with the Everest epic are referred to the bibliography on page 161.

STANLEY SNAITH

CHINGFORD HATCH,

June, 1937.

CONTENTS

PART ONE

CHAP.		PAGE
I.	THE IDEA	I
II.	THE SCENE	II
III.	APPROACH AND ATTACK	26
IV.	TRAGEDY	54
V.	THE ATTACK MAINTAINED	78

PART TWO

VI.	CIRCLING THE SUMMIT	94
VII.	KANGCHENJUNGA AND NANDA DEVI	112
VIII.	NANGA PARBAT	128
IX.	CONCLUSION	151
	EPILOGUE	156
	POSTSCRIPT	157
	BIBLIOGRAPHY	161
	INDEX	163

ILLUSTRATIONS

	Facing Page
MOUNT EVEREST	I
THE WAY TO EVEREST	12
KHAMBA DZONG	32
TOWARDS THE SUMMIT	44
BOOTS	54
ON THE GLACIER	64
APPROACHING THE SOUTH PEAK OF EVEREST	105
KANGCHENJUNGA	116

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The compilation of this little book would have been impossible without the stimulus and practical help of many other books, a list of which will be found on page 161.

MOULINI EVERLST1
From tear the Bive Comp



PART ONE

CHAPTER I

THE IDEA

A WELL-KNOWN mountaineer has told an illuminating story of an Alpine peasant who naively believed that climbers ascended his native mountains in order to despoil the precious mines that the gods had placed upon the summits. When his error was pointed out to him he was incredulous. "What!" he exclaimed, "there are no mines then?"

"No," he was told.

"No gold?"

"No."

"Nor silver?"

"Certainly not."

"Not even lead?"

"Not even lead."

"But"—scratching his head in perplexity—"there must be *some* reason for such madness!"

So with Everest. Why *bother* to climb it? What good does it do to anyone? Such questions are often asked by people who have pondered over the strange antics of men who leave the comfort of their homes to fight their way—"in between the chinks of Death's teeth," as one of the climbers put it—towards the summit of Mount Everest. That men should court privation and even death for such fruitless ends is, to the stay-at-home, a matter for wonder.

But the reason is simple. Mountain climbing is a sport. It is not practised for rewards, for fame, or even primarily for scientific purposes. Like any other sport,

it is its own reward. A swimmer does not plunge into the sea at Dover because he thinks that is the easiest or safest way of reaching France. The fox-hunter is not chasing his dinner. Sport is independent of practical results. It is a personal thing. To the mountaineer it is not merely the attainment of the summit that counts, but the exercise of craft, knowledge, nerve and sinew in achieving that goal. He returns again and again to the hills because only in the hills does he find joy and self-fulfilment. He cannot explain it. He is just made that way. Any mountain that has dignity or beauty, or the promise of thorny climbing problems—whether it be the 2,000-feet Pillar Rock in Cumberland or the 29,000-feet Everest—inspires him with the desire to climb. A summit unwon is a thorn in his flesh.

Few sports are richer, more varied, more healthful, more exhilarating, than this. The grip of the nailed boots on firm honest rock after the shale and seracs of the glacier ; the crisp ring of the ice axe in step-cutting ; the upward thrust of the shoulders, pillared by the stiffened arms, to bring the knee on to a ledge ; the light leap across a crevasse ; the feel of the rope in the hands ; the little brilliant flowers growing in crannies of rock ; the champagne and cigarette on the summit—well-being and peace ; the glory of the panorama won by personal effort : mountaineering literature is full of such matters. To the layman they are nothing. To the climber they are of the very essence of life.

In conquering the mountains the climber uncovers his own unsuspected powers, asserts within himself the triumph of mind over matter. The hills are strong, but man is stronger. Professor Tyndall, whose interest in mountains was at first exclusively scientific, crossed a ridge on the Matterhorn—a ridge as narrow as a sheep-wall—and then was peeved because his guides refused

to allow him to attempt the precipice beyond owing to a hammering gale. Geoffrey Bruce, practically without experience of rock work, accompanied Finch up the treacherous slabs of Everest to 27,300 feet, where a slip would have meant death ; and Captain Noel, equally inexperienced, ascended repeatedly to 23,000 feet and continued to turn the handle of his film camera long after all feeling had gone from his fingers.

And there is something more. On the mountains man forges bonds of the finest comradeship. Two men roped on a precipice, each with his life in the other's hands, develop a delicacy of understanding, a fulness of mutual trust, that is as precious as it is rare. Their minds and bodies function harmoniously, absorbed in a purpose which is immediate, invigorating, and pure of earthly taint. Mountaineering is selfless. When Frank Smythe, with the hard-won summit of Kamet within his reach, thrust his coolie porter forward to be first on that summit, he would have scoffed at any suggestion of altruism. He was merely, in the most expressive way at his command, rendering acknowledgement of the service and spirit of one who, as a duty and for no remuneration worth speaking of, had shared the risks and rigours of the climb. The man, whatever the colour of his skin, was *white*, and that was all that mattered.

Mountaineering as a sport is essentially a modern phenomenon. Before the eighteenth century we hear little of climbing for its own sake. Although the Bible has several incidents suggesting that the inspiration of the hills was not unknown—Moses ascending Sinai to receive the Commandments, Christ in meditation on the Mount of Olives—ancient peoples on the whole regarded mountains with a marked lack of interest. It was

merely military necessity that led Hannibal to cross the Alps with troops and elephants in 218 B.C.—by what route is unknown. In the Middle Ages mountains were objects of horror and affright, and the clergy prayed for protection against their devilish powers.

Curiously enough, 1492—the year of Columbus's discovery of the New World—is the first notable date in the story of mountain climbing. In obedience to a whim of Charles VIII of France, the Alpine Mont Aiguille, "The Inaccessible Mountain," 7,000 feet high and riven by precipices, was climbed by a force of about a dozen men. According to an official report the ascent was organized "like a battle." The company, who stayed on the summit for a week, baptized the mountain and chanted solemn masses. The example of this extraordinary feat was not fertile, and we must conclude that those who took part in it were not infectiously excited by this new game of climbing. Mountain ascents for the next three hundred years were isolated and haphazard affairs, and many who actually made climbs did so in superstitious fear and trembling. Horrific creatures, it was declared, inhabited the upper slopes; the summit of the Matterhorn was a fortress guarded by demons and witches; and the sixteenth-century German scientist Johann Scheuchzer, in his valuable studies of the movements of glaciers, did not omit to describe the fabulous dragon-stones, jewels detached from the eyes of mountain dragons while they slept. So the valleys of the Alps remained Adamless Edens, except for the native chamois-hunters, and even these kept well below the snow line.

Yet it was in the Alps that mountain climbing was born. In 1760 a twenty-year-old Genevese, Horace Benedict de Saussure, moved by a passion for geological and botanical research, penetrated some distance up

one of the glaciers that flank Mont Blanc, the King of the Alpine wonderland, but was deterred from further investigation by the formidable aspect of the mountain. But what he had seen was unforgettable: a virgin world, unbelievably pure and vast. For twenty-seven years he nursed the ambition to attempt those ice-clad slopes, and in 1787, with an impressive regiment of local guides, he forced a way up the shattered glacier bed to the foot of the mountain and commenced the ascent. The expedition occupied four days, each night being spent in tents which went up on the backs of the guides. De Saussure tells us how thrilling was the spectacle of the cliffs and ridges bathed in moonlight; the guides on their part were haunted with nameless fears. The going, though strenuous enough, was technically less onerous than had been expected, but mountain sickness, the ever-present danger of avalanches, and the fear of falling, were very wearing to the nerves. They reached the crest without any untoward events, and from its snowy expanse, 15,782 feet above sea level, were rewarded with an awe-inspiring vista of peaks and valleys. This was not the first ascent of Mont Blanc—it had been scaled the year before—but it is noteworthy as an early instance of a climb planned and conducted in the modern manner, by stages between bivouacs.

From this time the Alps rapidly came to be accepted as a happy hunting ground for climbers. The Jungfrau, the Wetterhorn and other heights were subdued in turn. Professor John Tyndall, Irish climber and scientist, ascended Mont Blanc in 1857 and Monte Rosa, the second highest peak of the Alps, in 1858. Seven years later Edward Whymper, a wood engraver from London—Britain was well to the fore in mountain climbing—after several attempts led a party to the summit of the Matterhorn, a brilliant achievement marred by the

saddest Alpine tragedy to that date, when four men fell and were killed in the descent. One of the guides was accused of having cut the rope to save his own life, and Whymper, a man in whom fairness and loyalty were a passion, devoted years of his life to establishing the man's innocence. Before the end of the nineteenth century the infant art of mountaineering had emerged into confident maturity; its converts were legion; technique had been laid down to its last detail; a climbing tradition and literature established. Hundreds of ascents are now made every year, increasing the achievement and alas! in many instances swelling the casualty roll. Men have learnt the use of rope and axe, the habits of snow and ice masses; studied the various rock strata and the indications of stone-falls; become wise in weather portents. Alpine valleys have been explored and mapped, and climbers' huts erected at convenient stages on the mountains. Chamonix, at the foot of Mont Blanc, and Zermatt, under the Matterhorn, have grown from obscure villages into thriving towns; and funicular railways transport the lazy and infirm to heights which men once attained only through struggle and adversity. Tripod and cinematograph cameras have been dragged to several summits, and the splendours of snow and rock can now be enjoyed without taking one's feet from the mantelpiece.

As crest after crest was reached and fresh routes became increasingly hard to find, the novelty of Alpine climbing wore off. Mountaineers began to cast their eyes farther afield. Douglas Freshfield led the way to the Caucasus range in Russia. In 1880 Whymper, with two Swiss guides, ascended the volcanic mountains Chimborazo and Cotapaxi in the Andes: the heat on Cotapaxi was so fierce that his rubber tents melted. Before the turn of the century Kilimanjaro, 4,000 feet

higher than Mont Blanc, the Ruwenzori chain ("Mountains of the Moon," long thought to be the source of the Nile) and other African eminences were "bagged." British climbers had long since tasted the delights of rock work in North Wales, the Lake District and Scotland; Canadians were wrestling with the virgin solitudes of the Rockies; Americans frolicked on the Alaskan ranges: the sport was becoming world-wide.

But there was still one great climbing problem untackled.

Inevitably, as a natural result of human ambition, men's thoughts turned to Everest. Here, in the undisputed monarch of all the world's mountains, was a problem to prove a climber's mettle, a task beside which the conquest of the Alps or even the Andes was kindergarten play. The whole art of mountaineering had, it seemed, been perfected to equip men for this ultimate contest.

Could the mountain be climbed? No one had any idea. Its approaches were unknown. Its structure was conjectural. Its weather conditions could only be guessed at. But there was no lack of climbers willing to put the matter to the test. Geographers and naturalists too were interested. There was no knowing what light Everest, immemorial and unchallenged, might yet throw upon the enigma of the earth's history. Merely by virtue of its inviolacy, and the political barriers placed round it by the authorities of Tibet and Nepal, the mountain began to exert a strange lure upon the minds of men.

In the early years of the century, and after the Great War, there wakened a burning desire to expand the boundaries of man's power. There had dawned an age of conquest and discovery. Man had learned to fly;

had gone down into the depths of the sea ; had explored the Poles and mapped and measured unknown wildernesses. He had weighed the stars and reduced the cosmos to an orderly pattern. He had looked, fearful and yet enchanted, into the flaming world spinning within the pin-point speck of the atom. He was, in a sense, master of the universe. Could he, then, be content to leave any spot of his own little world unexplored ? What was Everest that it should be immune from man's voracious curiosity ? . . .

But, said the sceptics, 29,145 feet ! Why, the altitude alone was enough to preclude all possibility of climbing the mountain ! A man could no more breathe at such a height than a fish out of water. His lungs would shrivel up like paper in a flame.

But, objected mountaineers, did these wiseacres *know* ? Had their theory been tested ?

Of course : by airmen in altitude flights.

That was different.

How different ?

Because the airman climbed swiftly—was hooked upward, so to speak, out of comparatively dense air into air that was thin and glacial, and had no opportunity to adapt himself to the new conditions.

Could climbers so "adapt" themselves ?

Well, the whole matter was still tentative. But there was no lack of evidence that they could. Early pioneers in the Alps suffered acutely at 15,000 feet, yet trained climbers had since found that, even above the 20,000 feet level, mere altitude, *in itself*, was no great hardship, *provided the climbs were not rushed*.

As for the technical difficulties of the Himalaya, mountaineers had a good idea of what would be encountered. Many fine Himalayan climbs had been made in districts which were not politically fenced off.

The brothers Schlagintweit had reached 22,260 feet on Kamet ; Mr. and Mrs. Bullock Workman had attained a height of 23,400 feet in the Karakorams of Central Asia ; and as recently as 1919 the Duke of the Abruzzi—who was always in the forefront when fresh climbing ground presented itself—had conquered a peak of 24,600 feet. Such pioneers had brought back a mass of invaluable data. The Alps, they reported, were simply useless as a measuring-rod for the obstacles to be overcome in the Himalaya. They described Himalayan ice as more plastic than that of the Alps : it formed suspended glaciers hundreds of feet thick and often thousands high : a glittering mail in which countless footholds have to be hacked. Owing to the steepness of the slopes—and Himalayan slopes are always steeper than they look, because of the colossal scale on which these mountains are built—such ice-falls are at all times liable to avalanche. An avalanche from one of these giants may weigh thousands of tons : cataclysms so shattering that the very whirlwind of their descent is sufficient to ravage forests many miles distant. The ice-ridges are precariously thin and steep and will break away at a touch. Then there are the unparalleled weather conditions : scorching heat, freezing cold, tempests so powerful that they twist the very rocks into fantastic swirls. Man must tread warily in the Himalaya, planning and anticipating as he goes ; no rashness, no take-a-chance gestures, but the slow progress of an attritional siege. He must make no mistake, or the mountains will punish him comprehensively.

Unless Everest was singularly favoured, that was probably what it would be like.

A forbidding prospect ! This would be no Alpine jaunt, with cairned and boot-scratched routes, a comfortable hotel to start from, stove-fugged huts to sleep

in on the way. No. It would be grim work, work for men who must go into training, get into the flower of condition, be large-hearted and of infinite endurance. But the clarion call had gone forth, and it did not fall upon deaf ears. The story of how men answered that call is one of the imperishable epics of our race.

CHAPTER II

THE SCENE

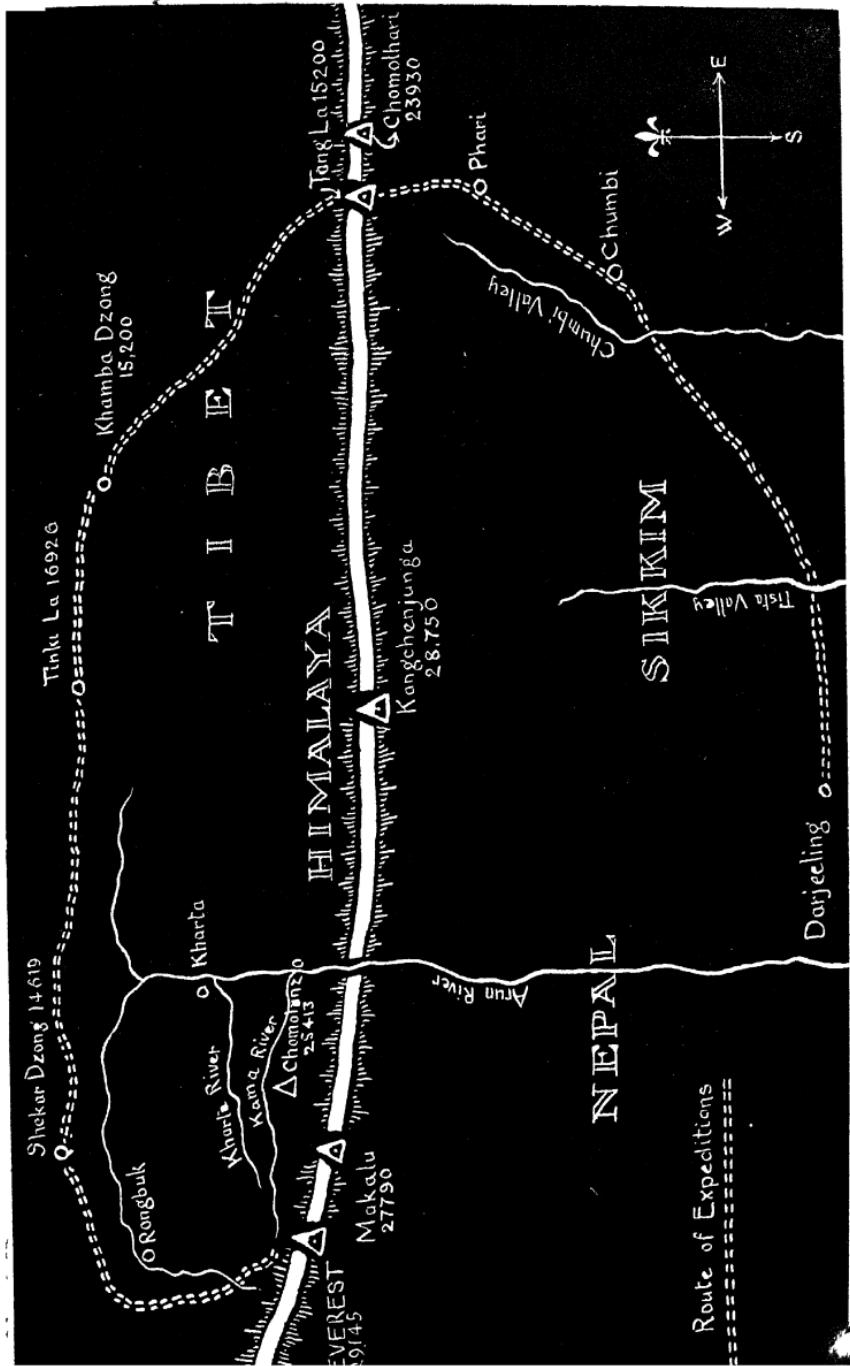
CAPTAIN J. B. L. NOEL, Himalayan explorer, stood on the top of the Langbu Pass and gazed speechless at the panorama before him. Disguised as a Moslem, avoiding villages as far as possible, he had worked his way round the north side of Kangchenjunga, risking hostility, hardship and death, to gain a near view of the world's highest summit. Facing him across the valley was a concourse of snow-clad peaks, the assembled might of the Himalaya, surging one above another out of the mist into the light of morning, with one great fang of ice towering above the rest. Suddenly, before his spellbound gaze, the clouds against which the mountains stood in sharp relief parted like a drop curtain. Beyond, majestically conjured out of nothingness, towered further, mountain masses, the loftiest of which thrust up a dazzling cone of snow. From its summit streamed a long steady banner of cloud. Its majesty and aloofness, as of a monarch among his vassals, were awe-inspiring. Trembling with eagerness, Noel made a compass test. He was right. There could be no doubt about it. That crowning peak was none other than Everest, the mountain whose miracle of silver sculpture is visible as far southward as Darjeeling, a hundred miles distant. The summit of all summits! It was within forty miles of him, a comparative stone's-throw in those vast regions. No white man had ever penetrated within such close quarters of Everest.

That was in 1913.

Everest, towering to 29,145 feet—five and a half

miles—above sea level, is the major eminence of the Himalaya, “Abode of Snow.” This chain of mountains, thrown up in fantastic rock masses by some convulsion of the earth, and still being pushed up by the pressure of the oceans, stretches in a curve 1,600 miles in length, and of an average breadth of 200 miles, along the northern boundary of India. It is a bewildering labyrinth of icy peaks, glaciers, valleys and gorges: cold gale-swept crests, massed like an army of spears, forest-clad depths in whose suffocating heat swarms a luxuriance of flowers. It numbers a hundred giants of 24,000 feet, twenty of 26,000 feet, and six of 27,000 feet; while at the southern end of the range, where it tapers to its narrowest, stand K2 or Mount Godwin-Austen (28,260 feet), Kangchenjunga (28,150 feet) and Everest. From this chain of mountains issue the sacred rivers, Indus and Brahmaputra, spreading their sacred waters across the plains to the sea. To bathe in these rivers thousands of pilgrims congregate from far-off lands.

Less than a hundred years ago the great area of Central Asia, from Tibet to the Pamirs, from the border of India to the Siberian steppes, was an open space on the maps, marked only with conjectural lines to represent the journeys of occasional explorers. Nepal to the south and Tibet to the north were at one in their determination to exclude white men; and as the mountains that sentinel their lands can only be approached by high narrow passes, the natives had no difficulty in intercepting intruders and either turning them back or murdering them. Occasionally daring explorers did contrive to enter these domains, but such reports as they smuggled back to civilization were fragmentary and tantalizing. The existence of Everest itself was unsuspected until 1852. Its discovery was not without dramatic moment. The Trigonometrical Survey of India, founded in 1800



THE WAY TO EVEREST

by Colonel Lambton, a man of quenchless ardour and perseverance, had been making surveys of the mountains from the Indian plains. Using the "gridiron" system of splitting up the country into triangles and drawing up measurements by the use of the theodolite, the survey had already measured extensive areas of India, and now the task of reducing the complicated geography of the Himalaya to coherent order was proceeding. The work was accompanied by much difficulty and hardship. Signal stations had to be established on upland and peak where white men had never been before, and there, with heroic disregard of numb fingers and wheezing lungs, the surveyors ascertained altitudes, made delicate calculations of longitude and latitude; patiently, and with scant hope of reward, "tieing in" hitherto un-surveyed regions with the Indian geodetic survey. The difficulties of moving from place to place over fordless rivers and along sheep-tracks up dizzy chasms—often travelling in the greatest secrecy—were aggravating, and so was the task of protecting the delicate survey instruments. But slowly, surely, the great work was carried forward. By 1852 scores of unnamed peaks had been observed and given distinguishing numbers. Among these was one known by the prosaic designation of "Peak XV." Standing far back and hidden by intervening mountains, it had hitherto attracted no special notice. But one day an Indian assistant, who had been subjecting the survey data of this peak to a careful check, hurried into the office of one of the assessors in breathless excitement.

"Sir," he exclaimed, "I have discovered the highest mountain in the world!"

The mountain's height was checked by the instruments and estimated at 29,000 feet (later amended to 29,145 feet, for high mountains can seldom be computed

accurately). As no native name for it could be ascertained (wherever possible native names were adopted by the survey) Peak XV was given the name of Everest, in honour of Sir George Everest, a former survey chief. It is now known that the Tibetans call it by a name infinitely richer in meaning: Chomolungma, meaning "Goddess of the Snows."

The placing of Everest on the map was the first act in a rousing drama which was to involve splendid feats of courage, to exact a grim toll of death, and to thrill the entire world. Its sequel was to be a conflict with all that is grimmest in nature, was to take men near to the physical limits of the world and to prove for all time what apparently impossible things can be achieved when the will and spirit of man are put to the test.

Before the English penetration in 1904 the Tibetan government had maintained a policy of stern and aloof isolation. Tibet is under the suzerainty of China, though to all intents and purposes the rulers are the religious authorities—the Lamas—the head of whom is the Delai Lama, who also goes under the picturesque title of "The Priest as Wide as the Ocean." The Lamas command nearly all the resources of the country and are masters—under Chinese approval—of all matters affecting the social well-being of the country. Pious though their lives are, they are intolerantly jealous of their rights, and have scant respect for peace when their authority is in question. Isolation suits them, for they know that outside influences would tend to weaken their power. It was for long their custom to arouse the enmity of their simple, hospitable peoples by telling them that Europeans would, if allowed, introduce terrible diseases and force upon them uncongenial religions. Similar stories were told to the Nepalese by *their* rulers: though since the Gurkha War of 1814-16, when Nepal

came into conflict with Britain and was defeated, relations between Britain and Nepal have been those of mutual respect and even friendship. The Gurkhas—as the Nepalese people are called—have so far bowed to civilization as to adopt such modern amenities as verandahed bungalows, swarming markets, skilfully constructed bridges to span the ravines ; but they deliberately keep their roads in disrepair to discourage visitors. “ The foreigners will bring motor-cars,” say the rulers ; “ after that comes the Bible. And with the Bible comes the bayonet,” they cynically add.

The mountain range of the Himalaya is like a rampart separating two distinctly different lands, different races and different religions : a wall breached only by the terrific gorge hacked out through long centuries by the River Arun, which cleaves its way southward from Everest into Nepal. Nepal is a land of valleys, cultivated with rice-fields running in terraces along the lower mountain slopes. It is rich in a tropical growth of pine, birch and ilex forests, and lavish of flowers. By contrast Tibet—“ the roof of the world ”—is desolate in the extreme. It constitutes a great table-land rising to 15,000 feet in height, and even its valley basins are higher above the sea than the highest mountain crests of many lands. The upper plateaux, barren and rocky, receive the winds that sweep down from the north over the sandy wastes of Central Asia. So that though Tibet lies between the latitude of Naples and Cairo, its climate, for the most part, is one of almost Arctic severity. Some parts are thrashed with tempests of hail and snow all the year round. Yet others are extremely hot and dry : so much so that logs will fall to pieces from sheer brittleness. Here and there, scores of miles apart, glisten salty lakes, where geese and ducks collect on their migration to India. Vegetation is stunted, and so rare are

trees that the few that are to be found are actually put under religious taboo. Occasionally huge pillars of salt stand out, carved by wind and cold, while near by will be found hot springs, their overflow frozen solid by the bitter wind.

The customs of the people have changed little with the passing of time. Trades and industries are few. The country is rich in mineral resources: in the rivers to the north handfuls of gold can be gathered from the sands: pure nuggets which would have made an Alaskan prospector turn green with envy. But the difficulties of transportation—for the country is without railways and practically roadless—and the stiff duties levied by the religious officials have prevented mining from being developed. A large proportion of the population, which numbers about 2,000,000, dwell in the valley of the Brahmaputra, where fruit-trees, barley and a few varieties of vegetables can be grown. But the peoples living up towards the snow line have a grim struggle for existence. They are mostly small farmers or keepers of flocks, and eke out a living by making woollen cloths, rugs and pottery. Their food is principally meat: mutton and yak (the Tibetan ox). Their special luxury, of which they are so fond that they drink as many as thirty bowls a day, is buttered tea. This they make out of the coarse brick tea imported from China; the tea is stewed with salt, soda, and butter which is kept for weeks until it turns rancid. It is taken in wooden bowls. This sickly stinking mess is no luxury to Europeans—the Everest climbers, who drank it out of courtesy to their hosts at the monasteries, were nauseated by it—but its richness in fats makes it very welcome to the Tibetans. Fats warm the blood, and keeping warm is the ruling problem of the Tibetan.

The homes of these needy people are primitive hovels

of mud and stone, warmed by fires of yak dung, which is practically their only fuel. Their dress is a bokkus, a loose blanket-like coat which they wear girdled at the waist ; in especially severe weather they wear over that a coat of sheepskin, with the wool—highly odorous but comforting—turned inwards. Cleanliness is a luxury the Tibetan despises. Washing in water would expose the pores to the knife-edged winds, whereas rancid grease makes a good protection for hands and face. When you talk to a Tibetan you are careful to keep on the windward side of him !

They are a kindly race, though by edict of the Lamas they are forbidden to furnish information to strangers. In their struggle to maintain existence they are shrewd and practical ; but their ideas of social justice recall in their crudity those of the Middle Ages. Thus murder is punishable by a fine whose value fluctuates according to the importance of the victim. To kill a Lama would be a crime of the most outrageous character, whereas the removal of a toiling farmer, whose wealth and position are microscopic, is beneath notice. A serious crime is tried by the ordeal of fire and oil. In the first case the accused is made to carry a red-hot stone in his bare hands ; in the second, he has to grope in a cauldron of boiling oil to find a pebble. If these tests fail to injure his hands he is adjudged innocent. If he blisters he is condemned.

The Tibetan religious systems are based upon superstitions utterly unintelligible to Europeans. Many of the tribes, instead of burying their dead, place them on a stone cairn for the sacred vultures to devour, what time the mourners chant weird hymns. Every Tibetan carries a praying wheel, upon which prayers are written ; and every rotation of the wheel brings merit and sanctity to its owner. Prayer flags—tall poles of bamboo from

which flutter pieces of cotton cloth—are placed outside their homes to ward off evil spirits. And in particular they revere the mountains. As they turn their eyes upon those shining shapes on the skyline their emotion is a mixture of dread and ecstasy.

On the summits of Everest and Kangchenjunga, they declare, live the gods in impregnable fortresses. The lower slopes are prowled by dreadful creatures, half men and half apes: the “Abominable Snowmen,” wild, shaggy, splay-footed beings who can kill a yak with one blow of the fist. They are the reincarnations of murderers who, long ago, fled into exile to the forests and glaciers. These Ishmaels of the snows have consorted with beasts and become carnivorous. When they are hungry they come down among the plainsmen and steal children. Their appetites, say the Tibetans with a shudder, are diabolically delicate, for they never bite off more than the ears and other tender portions, and throw the rest away.

No amount of argument can dissuade the natives of the uplands from these beliefs, as Lieutenant-Colonel Howard-Bury learnt when, in 1921, he was astonished to find the imprint of a foot in the snow at 20,000 feet on Everest. The print was clearly that of a naked foot, huge and splayed. It was too large to be human, and bore no resemblance to the spoor of the Himalayan bear, the only large animal he could imagine straying to such a height. His porters assured him that the print was that of a Snowman. Sceptically declining to accept so irrational an explanation, he nevertheless thought fit to record the event as possible evidence of the existence of an unknown race living among the mountains. And years before the Everest expeditions a traveller named Hugh Knight told of a strange being he had encountered on a mountain slope: a creature with a face of Mongoloid

cast, splay-footed, with the crouched shoulders and thick mane of a gorilla, leaping with marvellous sureness from rock to rock. In one hand it carried a primitive bow. Human or animal? It seemed to him a cross between the two. Certainly no human being could live naked in such winds. But equally certainly no animal could use, much less devise, a bow and arrow. It may be that the Himalaya, home of manifold secrets and mysteries, may yet give us the Missing Link: the intermediate creature through which the ape kingdom developed into human shape.

That the Himalaya should give birth to such legends is not surprising, for since the beginning of time these white aloof mountains have been to Eastern peoples a symbol of all that is lovely and venerable. At all times of the year, in bitter cold and torrid heat, come the pilgrims—Tibetan, Hindu, Butanese, Gurkha—climbing alone to offer their bodies and chant their petitions to the hills. “I will lift up mine eyes unto the hills, from whence cometh my help,” says the Psalmist; the Eastern pilgrim does more, he endures torments to obtain the peace and privacy of the high places where his spirit can find union with the Inmost. There come worshippers from the plains, shrivelled beings with the light of fanaticism in their eyes, half naked and matted of beard, covering hundreds of miles on their prostrate bodies. Dragging themselves along yard by yard, mile by mile, without ever standing upright, they never stop except to sleep or to eat the scraps of food thrown to them by passers-by. Such journeys, through jungle and swamp, drawing ever higher to the mountain-girt plains, often take as long as three or four years. At last, their pilgrimage over, they sit down where their sacred river bursts from the glacier, gazing into nothingness, rapt out of the humdrum realities of life; content to wait, if

need be, until the body withers to a skeleton and the spirit is transported to the high abode of the gods.

As the Mussulmen travel to Mecca, so do pious Buddhists flock from north, east and south to the city of Lhasa, Tibet's capital and religious centre, where lives the high-priest of the cult, the Delai Lama. A visit to this centre, vows the Buddhist, is an act of purification ; and as each pilgrimage entails the payment of certain fees to the priesthood of the religion, the Lamas and minor clergy of Tibet are not averse to these invasions. The Lamas and monks build their monasteries on hill-sides as close to the snow line as possible, where, in the celestial company of the mountains, they live their lives of seclusion and peace. Amazing are the stories told of the supernatural powers of these men. They can leave their bodies at will and wander in time and space ; they can pierce the mystery of the future ; and in their own persons they claim the reincarnation of past Buddhas.

Oddly enough, permission to approach Everest ultimately came, not from the ostensibly friendly Nepalese, but from the Tibetans. In 1904 a partial breakdown of the political barrier between Tibet and India was effected by a Mission which, under Colonel (now Sir) Francis E. Younghusband, was dispatched to Tibet to induce her to discontinue her hostile demonstrations on the Indian border, and also to arrange a treaty under which British trading posts should be established at certain points of the frontier. The whole of the north-eastern frontier was seething with trouble and Tibet's immunity from outside interference could no longer be respected. The Mission met with an unexpectedly vigorous reception, warriors armed with pikes and scythes disputing the way over the mountain passes. There was a sharp engagement on the rugged pass of Krao-La, but once

they had surmounted the passes the British, with their superior weapons and strategy, quickly put this rabble army to flight. They marched across the plateau and at length, by a road marked with cairns, prayer-flags, wheels and inscriptions, reached the far-famed Lhassa, long known as the "Forbidden City." To this force of infantry, cavalry and guns the city had no option but to throw open its doors. For the first time men of an alien religion climbed the three flights of stairs which are the only entrance into the Potala, the magnificent thousand-windowed palace which, from the top of a rocky hill, overlooks the capital. And there they found, embodied in a single city, the whole startling paradox of life as lived in that land of paradoxes.

Entered past a monastery beset with stately trees, under the enthroned splendour of the Potala, the capital with its blue-tiled streets was a city of magic, a veritable gem set in a land of snowy summits. The temples shone with gilded roofs, and within, in the dim light thrown by lamps of solid silver and gold, the holy men prostrated themselves before large jewelled images of Buddha, offering up their endless chants and supplications. All day those sacred temples throbbed to the booming of drums, the clash of cymbals, the beating of gongs. But in the byways all was changed. Here were windowless hovels, stinking within and dirty without, streets heaped with decaying garbage and roamed by half-wild mongrels: a swarming sink of humanity, Tibetans, Gurkhas and Chinese, the scourings of Asia. Parks filled with the pure air from the snow regions, houses in which throve sickness and disease; the opulence of a cultured religion, the rags and vermin of a mediaeval squalor: such are the contradictions upon which Tibetan life is based.

The treaty was signed, the Grand Lama was exiled

and a new Lama, a man more amiably disposed towards India than his predecessor, was appointed.

Tibet had felt the weight of Britain's power, but Colonel Younghusband, whose knowledge of the Asiatics is profound, carried out the discussions and negotiations with such superb tact that in Tibetan eyes British prestige was enormously increased. In the years that followed Tibet was to find that a treaty with Britain could be maintained without the imperilment of her own privileges and customs. So complete was her change of attitude that during the Great War she offered a thousand soldiers to fight on the side of the Allies. The prospect of obtaining permits to approach Everest was at last nearing realization.

The conception of an expedition to Everest cannot be credited to any single individual. It was undoubtedly entertained by many mountaineers many years before it emerged into the light of publicity. Captain Noel, after his audacious journey to within forty miles of the mountain, was especially devoted to the idea. Another enthusiast was Dr. A. M. Kellas. Kellas, a Scots doctor, had been in the habit of spending his vacations in the Himalaya, and had combined exploration of unknown regions with the hobby of mountain climbing. Using yaks for transportation to the foothills, and the natives for portage on the mountains themselves, he climbed many virgin peaks and virtually originated the only method by which such a remote and embattled mountain as Everest could be essayed. A man of retiring disposition, he made no parade of his achievements, but already, in the days just preceding the Great War, he had in his possession photographs—obtained none knew how—of the glaciers issuing from the Tibetan side of Everest. He had even plotted out a route by which,

failing official permits, Everest could be approached by a mountain pass called the Tok Tok La. From this pass, he said, he knew of a way to a point where the River Arun was spanned by a wooden bridge, and from thence it would be practicable to penetrate into one of the great valleys from which access to the mountain would be straightforward. He had other routes, too, worked out with a surprising fulness of detail. Such was his consuming ambition to climb Everest that he was prepared to make a surreptitious assault in defiance of British and Tibetan prohibitions. The war, however, prevented the fulfilment of such plans, and, as it turned out, he was able to travel towards his goal openly, though it was his cruel destiny never to set foot on Everest itself.

In 1919, following a lecture by Captain Noel to the Royal Geographical Society, in which he gave a description of his journey to Tibet, the proposition of attempting the ascent of Everest became a concrete possibility. A previous suggestion as to climbing the mountain had been made twelve years before, but Lord Morley, the then Secretary of State, vetoed it on the ground that the entry of a British expedition into Tibet would violate a recent treaty with Russia. Now, however, there appeared to be no such obstacle. The Tibetan rulers had recently been in conflict with China, and were known to be more than ever anxious to maintain amicable relations with the government of India. And there could be no doubt as to the practical advisability of such an expedition. "Now that the Poles have been reached," Noel said, "it is generally felt that the next and equally important task is the exploration and mapping of Mount Everest." It could not, he urged, be long before the highest peak in the world was trodden and its outskirts surveyed and photographed for the benefit of geographers. "Some

day," he prophesied, "the political difficulties will be overcome."

When, shortly afterwards, Sir Francis Younghusband came to the Presidency of the Royal Geographical Society he determined to make the climbing of Everest the principal business of the society during his term of office. To him more than any other individual is due the honour of instigating and inspiring the splendid efforts of the expeditions. With his deep insight into the Tibetan peoples and their ways of life, his experience as a traveller among the hills and forests of the Himalaya, his passionate devotion to the cause of knowledge, his spiritual sense of the poetry of mountains, and his diplomatic experience gained in such missions as that of 1904, he was the ideal "father" for such an enterprise. With the co-operation of the Alpine Club he requested the Secretary of State for India to receive a deputation.

Colonel Howard-Bury was then sent to India to express the wishes of the two societies to the Indian government. The upshot was that a representative of the Indian government was despatched to Tibet to sound the Delai Lama, and if possible obtain his approval of an expedition. The Delai Lama was not slow in giving his approval, providing certain reservations were complied with. These reservations were strict and clear.

No wild life should be interfered with. For animals and birds the Tibetans have a half affectionate, half mystical regard, as is perhaps natural in a land where all living things, from mankind down to the minutest insect, wage a common battle for existence against the earth and the elements. That battle has created a unique and touching blood bond between all living creatures. The mountain goats come trustingly to monastery doors to be fed. The larger animals share their food with the birds. In animal life the Tibetan sees the reborn

souls of humans. So hospitable are the Lamas to living things that they even encourage vermin to live on their bodies and in their clothes. The Tibetan will only kill wild creatures when driven by the necessity of obtaining food. The expedition must respect these views.

Nor must the mountain itself be violated in any way, as, for instance, by the breaking off of fossils (a prohibition which Odell, the geologist, flouted with cheerful contempt for such prejudices).

These and other conditions agreed to, the way to Everest was open, and in the spring of 1921 the first of the Mount Everest expeditions, with Lieutenant-Colonel Howard-Bury as leader, set sail for India.

CHAPTER III

APPROACH AND ATTACK

AN express runs from Calcutta to Siliguri; thence a tiny toy-like train on a single-guage track climbs eight thousand feet in forty miles, twisting and turning from the plains, past tea gardens, their broad low bushes standing in straight ranks, among which the coolie men and women, gaunt and fever-yellowed, go monotonously to and fro stripping the leaves; along the lips of fearsome precipices, up and up, chugging mightily with the effort, from the heat and discomfort of India into the pure air blown down from the hills. A man perched at the front of the engine flashes a lantern to scare elephants and tigers that wander on to the track. The train sometimes bends so far back upon itself that the driver and guard can hold conversations. (General Bruce, leader of the 1924 Everest expedition, used to jump out of his carriage and race across the hillside to wait for the twisting train to catch up with him!) Then suddenly a corner is turned, and the traveller sees, clear of the surrounding hills and forests, the up-flung brow of Kangchenjunga, so immeasurably lofty as it rises above the clouds that it is often taken for a cloud itself. And presently, with a last satisfied puff, the train runs into the hill-station of Darjeeling, last outpost of civilization, perched thousands of feet above the valleys and facing a mountain prospect finer than that enjoyed by any other town in the world. Looking towards the Himalaya, one sees slopes swimming in the deep purple of rhododendrons, and above and beyond, tier upon tier shining in the clear air, the pinnacles with their eternal snows.

Darjeeling is a town of forty thousand people, so renowned for the tonic quality of its air that in the summer season there is a constant influx of white visitors from the plains. Here too come the tea and rice planters to dispose of their produce. Its bazaar, a riot of colours, is frequented by the hill tribes of the country round about—a medley of different tongues and different raiments. There are Tibetans who have come down over the passes through Sikkim ; Lepchas, from Sikkim itself, with their brown oriental faces, the women heavy with jangling ornaments ; pigtailed Bhutra men, Bhutra women flashing their silver charm-cases as they walk ; women of Nepal, their noses grotesquely hung with ornaments that clatter down to the chin ; and others too numerous to mention.

In the streets the clumsy bullock carts go creaking, and small brown-faced rickshaw men run lightly with their fares ; coolies stagger Atlas-like under colossal loads, which poise swaying on their shoulder-blades, supported by a wicker band across the forehead.

But one does not go to Darjeeling to study the racial types, interesting though they are. The visitor who is enterprising will leave his bed of a morning while the streets are still empty and the bazaar closed, and get a rickshaw man to transport him to a certain hill near by, from which the dawn can be seen over the mountains. The reward is munificent. As the sky lightens he sees a line of molten gold slowly driving the violet shadows from the slopes. Crest after crest catches fire. Then one masterful summit stands out illuminated along its whole length.

“ What is that mountain ? ” the traveller asks.

“ Kangchenjunga, Sahib,” says the rickshaw man.

“ How near it looks ! ”

“ It is forty miles away, Sahib.”

“ Oh ! It looks much nearer.”

“ But will the Sahib look at the other peak behind it ? ”

“ The smaller one to the left ? ”

“ Yes, Sahib. Do you know what that is ? ”

“ No.”

“ That, Sahib,”—the man’s voice will sink to a hushed whisper—“ that is the Goddess Mother.”

“ Everest ? ”

“ Everest.”

The traveller looks disappointed. “ I thought it would be plainer—bigger.”

“ No, Sahib.” The instructor is proud of his knowledge. “ It is a hundred miles away. But it is big, very big. The other mountains hide it, that is all.” He sighs. “ It is a very beautiful mountain.”

“ How does one get there ? ”

“ Through forests, Sahib, over the plains, up terrible glaciers. It is a cruel mountain to work on. . . . Beautiful, but cruel.”

“ You have been there ? ”

“ I carried loads, Sahib. I slept in the high tents. Some of my comrades were killed. . . .”

Yes, some of the Darjeeling coolies who carry loads or pull rickshaws, or scrape a living by acting as guides to strangers, were members of the portage staffs without whose stubborn and cheery devotion to duty any advance upon Everest would have been impossible. Tibetans and Sherpas from Nepal, men of the hills, they have been accustomed to hardship all their lives. Small and slender, tough as teak, these cheery little imps were the uncomplaining beasts of burden ; some of them have written their names large upon the Himalayan climbers’ tablet of honour. One of the expedition’s first jobs after the arrival at Darjeeling was the assembling of a body of such men to manage the stores and luggage

on the way to Tibet and subsequently upon Everest itself.

Four days were spent by Howard-Bury's party in Darjeeling: a rather hectic four days in which stores, in addition to those brought from England, had to be purchased and divided into loads, cooks and coolies engaged and rates of pay settled, interpreters obtained, routes checked, and countless other preliminary matters settled. The expedition—consisting of the climbers, two surveyors, a naturalist and a doctor, forty coolies and a hundred mules—left Darjeeling on May 18th, 1921. A direct route towards Everest being impracticable because it would have led through forbidden Nepal, it would be necessary to make a long detour to the east, between the mountains Kangchenjunga and Chomolhari, cross into Tibet, and so wheel round to approach Everest from the north. This would involve a journey of several hundred miles, but it was unavoidable.

The morning that the cavalcade set forth there was a tropical downpour—the rain of the Chota Bursat, or “Little Monsoon,” which inevitably heralds the approach of the true monsoon a few weeks later. Consequently the going was for some days far from comfortable. Their way—which was the main trade route to the north-east—led through dense forests, sheltered by hills and seemingly almost airless, where the imprisoned moisture of the rain hung in heavy, oppressive vapours. Clothing was constantly soaked. Everyone dripped with perspiration and experienced a deadening languor. The mules slipped frequently on the muddy track; and, worse still, the rain brought out the leeches, which, dropping in dozens from the branches, stung the beasts' hides and left a trail of blood spots on the track. But if the body was uncomfortable there was much to occupy the mind and senses. The forests were luxuriant enough

to delight the eye of an artist. Tall tree-ferns rose up to thirty feet and hung out their arches of foliage ; their stems were encrusted with great orchids. Everywhere the ground was beset with flowers. To complete the symphony of colours, crowds of butterflies of gorgeous blues and yellows flittered back and forth across the track.

Sikkim was entered, and now the way ascended out of the valley into fresher airs. The elements relenting, the procession passed in bright sunshine through woods of oak and magnolias. Here were masses of rhododendrons—pink, crimson, yellow, mauve—and, strangely reminding them of home, clumps of saxifrage and tiny yellow flowers which they could have sworn were English primroses.

The mules were fat from their idle life on the plains, and lamentably unfitted for the shrewder air and the rough going of Sikkim. Many had to be sent back and substitutes secured on the way.

The party plodded along the eccentric road which winds over the Jelap Pass, at the top of which, at 14,300 feet, a stone cairn marks the boundary between Sikkim and Tibet. From here they had an impressive view of Chomolhari, its rugged head showing metal-bright in the sunshine, its bossy precipices of rock sweeping sheer into the valley. This valley, which they now entered, was a delight. Under the crisp blue Tibetan sky it lay open to the mountains, and every breeze carried an intoxicating odour of wild roses. Small villages were passed, collections of thatch-roofed mud-huts, housing little communities that scratch the soil with wooden ploughs, to wring an existence so precarious that a spell of rain, rotting the roots of the shallow crop, scourges them with famine. Women were seen drawing water from the wells, or going to the little temple with offerings

of fruit and flowers for the stone image of their god. There were humble monasteries where the monks, grave and dignified, spent their time in making illuminated copies of religious books, or moulding small clay images of Buddha which they traded among the neighbouring villages. Remote communities fenced off from the busy world, living their lives as they did centuries ago, serenely untroubled by the miseries and disasters that afflict more "civilized" races! In one such monastery the party saw a praying wheel five feet high and six feet in diameter, inside which, they were told, were two million written prayers.

"And every time the wheel revolves all those prayers ascend to heaven?" they asked through their interpreters.

"Every time."

So each of the Englishmen solemnly turned the wheel, and at each revolution a bell rang, and they wondered what reward such a voluminous petition would bring them.

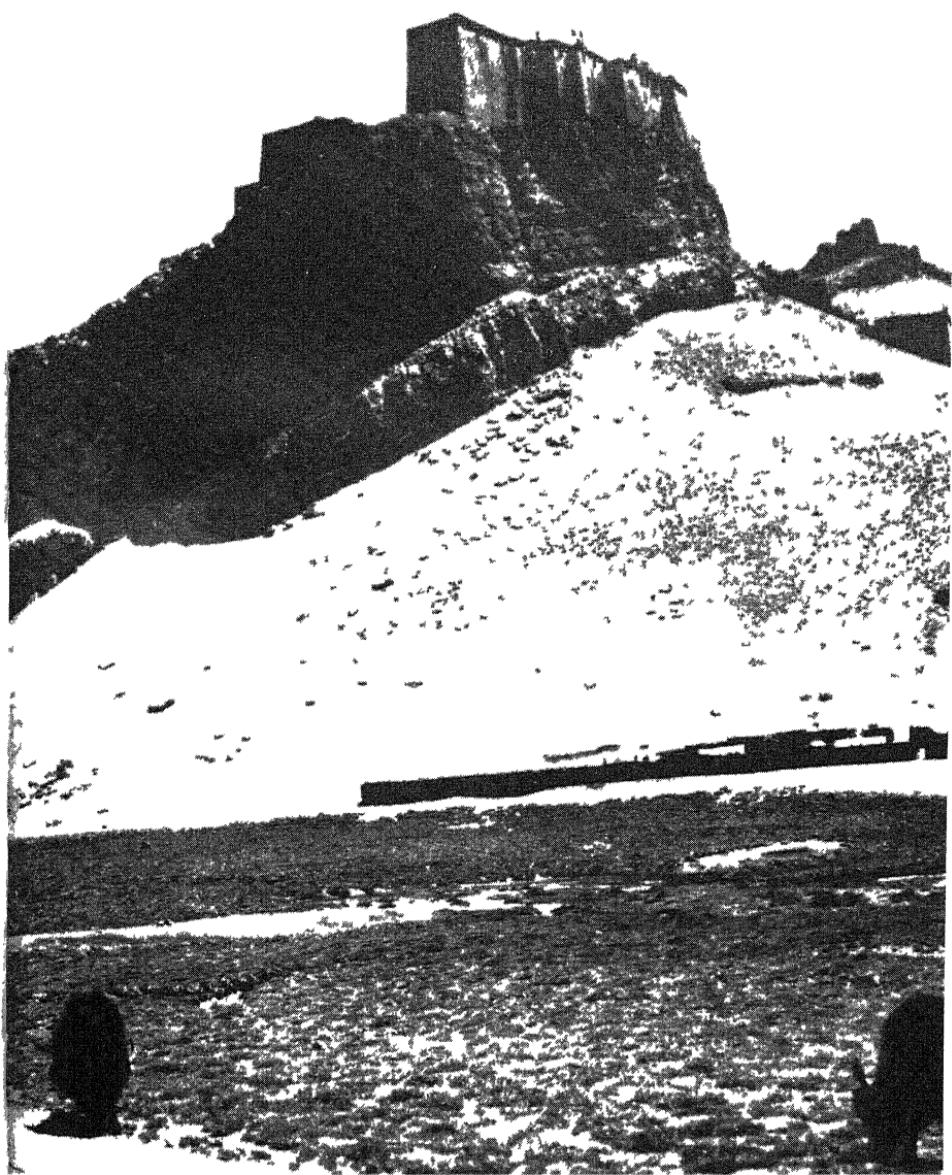
Long they gazed at the shallow lakes they presently encountered—lakes of blue, purple and green, marvellously lucid waters reflecting upside-down the crystal snows of the mountains. Dippers and wagtails played about these waters, delightful creatures which seemed to feel no fear of humans. And in one place they came upon a strange wilderness of crumbling ruins—heaps of rubble, fragments of standing walls—mute relics of towns of which mankind has lost all record.

Beyond Phari, the highest and dirtiest town in the world, where there is a post and telegraph office from which the despatches of the expedition were subsequently sent down to India, the expedition equipped itself with yaks in place of the ponies, as being better adapted to the rough ground and the trying climate of Tibet. The yak is a positive godsend to the Tibetans. Nimble of

foot, yet built solid as a rock—one almost expects moss to grow on his flanks—he thrives on high altitudes, and indeed cannot live in the denser air below eight thousand feet. He does not mind when his fur is matted with frozen snow, and when the wind is more than usually piercing he turns his back to it and lets it blow his shaggy mane protectively over his face. To the Tibetans he represents transport, food, fuel, and even building material—for it is the mane of the yak which binds together the mud of their house walls. “He is as worthy as a yak” is the highest praise the Tibetan can apply to someone he admires greatly.

The road ascended again on to the real plains of Tibet, wheeling round westward, and north of Kangchenjunga. Soon they had a foretaste of the kind of weather conditions they were to encounter. The woods fell behind, flowers became less frequent, and the wind, tearing over the full length of the Himalaya, was so biting that it pierced through layer upon layer of woollen clothing. At night the stars were fiercely brilliant, and rushing waterfalls froze stiff. Animal life grew scarcer, though here and there were seen flocks of sheep nuzzling through the hard surface of the soil to get at the plant-roots beneath. And once they stared up in amazement to see a dark speck throbbing in the sunlight and hear a twittering touchingly familiar: a skylark, by all that was miraculous!

After weeks of journeying the expedition arrived at Khamba Dzong, and here a very real calamity befell them. Ever since traversing the unhealthy humid valleys outside Darjeeling that grand pioneer Dr. Kellas had been out of sorts, and the brisk air of Tibet, far from improving his condition, had rather worsened it. For some days he had been too ill to walk or ride, and had had to be carried on a litter. It was not, however,



KHAMBA DZONG

thought that his condition was serious, though his resistance was undoubtedly weakened by some exhausting climbs which he had made earlier in the year. He maintained his good spirits, and when Howard-Bury, the leader, hurried on in advance over the high pass that leads to the valley in which Khamba Dzong lies, he was under the impression that Kellas was recovering. On his arrival at the monastery he was met by the Jongpen, the head monk, who received him with dignified friendliness. As they stood exchanging courtesies, a man came running up with the news that Dr. Kellas had died of heart-failure when crossing the pass. His loss, apart from the sorrow they felt at the passing of a good friend, was in a practical sense a serious one. None knew the Himalaya better than he, and none had been more closely identified with the Everest project. His mountain knowledge, his notable gifts as a climber, and his unquenchable enthusiasm, would have been incalculable assets when Everest came to be tackled. But it was not to be. They buried him on the crest of a hill facing the monastery from the south. The porters, who were expert cairn-builders—for any heap of stones is to the Tibetan a monument to his gods—erected a cairn above his grave. And there they left him, in sight of the very peaks he had climbed and loved, with the white crest of Everest—the goal he had longed for these many years—in sight a hundred miles to the westward.

Two other climbers were ill and had to be sent back into Sikkim. The climbing party was now reduced to two, Mallory and Bullock, both of whom were new to the Himalaya.

At Khamba Dzong, a monastery built upon a crag, the visitors were well entertained—the Delai Lama's instructions to that effect had been circulated in advance—and Howard-Bury delighted the Jongpen with a

present of an electric torch. Another twenty-seven miles brought them to Shekar Dzong, where, shining like crystal, another fortress monastery (never before seen by Europeans) clings dizzily to the tip of a pyramid of rock which rises almost vertically 2,000 feet from the plateau. These fortress monasteries, constructed out of mud and stone, are miracles of soaring symmetry. Of all Asiatics the Tibetans are the finest architects, and their buildings seem to partake of the very majesty of the hills, breathing lofty purpose in every line.

The way now led over mountain passes, through deep gorges, and across glacial streams, the fording of which with the laden animals was extremely difficult. Occasional encampments were passed, and caves in which hermits lived in ecstatic poverty. Vegetation grew ever scarcer, the wind ever fiercer, as they drew near to the mountains. A month after the start from Darjeeling the cavalcade arrived at the Rongbuk Monastery, lonely outpost of humanity, where twenty Lamas pursue their exalted and secret lives under the shadow of the Goddess Mother. The sight that met them was the very acme of scenic drama. The Rongbuk Valley is a mile wide and twenty miles long, a grey, treeless and stony amphitheatre; and there before them, enthroned at the valley's end, reigned the mountain of their dreams. In the rarefied atmosphere she stood out wonderfully sharp, detailed, *near*, a prodigy of glorious architecture, her six-mile streamer of blown ice-dust trailing proudly from her coned summit.

Everest!

The Goddess Mother presiding over her solitudes, trailing her icy glacier-skirts before them, seeming to say *Come and take me, for I am yours.* And there was not a man among them whose blood did not tingle at the sight of her.

The journey was over. They were within the shrine of Everest. Now their work began in earnest. A base camp was pitched a few miles up the valley from the monastery, and Morshead and Wheeler, the surveyors, set out to explore the surrounding country, while the climbing party, consisting of Mallory and Bullock, had now the thorny task of searching out a practicable route to the mountain. *To* the mountain : for there was no question yet of climbing upon Everest itself. The mountain had, so to speak, to be *found*. It is one thing to identify a mountain over ten miles distant, but quite another matter to find a way to its foot. The closer one draws to it, the larger, proportionately, become the subsidiary features of the landscape. Intervening peaks, valleys and glaciers hide the mountain, detours have to be made to outflank obstacles, and other peaks appear into view, confusing the sense of direction. Everest is built on a massive scale—a tunnel bored through the diameter of its base would be sixteen miles long—and the business of disentangling the uncharted network of its approaches was the unavoidable preliminary to the exploration of routes on Everest itself. The Alpine climber looks for the difficult route, the Himalayan climber for the easy one ; and the whole structure of the mountain and its outlying spurs would have to be understood before a climbing route could be chosen.

With glowing optimism and a fixed resolution Mallory and his companion threw themselves into the task. For this was to be the crown of Mallory's climbing career. Both for reconnaissance and climbing he was ideally equipped. Though he was new to the Himalaya, his knowledge of mountains was extensive ; and he combined a subtle and penetrating intelligence, with a quality of *dash* that was quite his own. Nothing daunted George Leigh-Mallory ; to his ardent temperament

climbing was dull without its spice of danger. A school-master, he was adored by his pupils; a climber, he was envied by the fraternity; a man, he was cherished by his friends.

“That young man will not be alive for long,” said an Austrian climber who watched Mallory on Snowdon in 1911, and there were many who thought that Mallory’s coltishness on mountains savoured of the defiant. But he did live. He had his own standards of safety. Such were his strength, his sense of balance, the delicacy and quickness of his judgment, that risks which most mountaineers would consider insanely dangerous were the perfection of safety to him. He loved to climb alone, to have his fate in his own hands, to exercise his sinews and intelligence to the utmost against formidable odds. Once, climbing with a friend in the Alps, he fell when attempting an upward leap to reach a small handhold. He hurtled down to the full length of the rope, which, secured round a rock, mercifully held. There he swung, ignominiously, between heaven and earth, until he recovered his breath. Then he called out, “Lower away!” His friend gave him more rope, Mallory casually hooked himself to the cliff face with his axe, and in a few minutes had scrambled up to rejoin his companion. He resumed his climb as coolly as though nothing had happened.

Mallory’s first approach to the mountain was by the Rongbuk Glacier. With his porters he pushed on to the head of the glacier—teaching them the complicated craft of glacier climbing as he went. They had been equipped with proper climbing boots—spacious enough to hold three pairs of socks, thick leather soles solidly nailed round the rim, lightly nailed in the centre (for nails conduct the cold from the ground.) They proved to be quick learners, and the dexterous and cheerful

way in which these load-carriers bore themselves in dangerous places was a source of wonder and admiration to all the Everest expeditions. Equally impressive was their patient acceptance of hardship, and their courage in defying a mountain peopled by their religion with unspeakable horrors. Their trust in the Sahibs was implicit ; otherwise not one of them would have ventured beyond the monastery.

The glacier was a wonderland of seracs—steeple-s and standing cascades of ice thrust up by the splitting of the ice under tension where the glacier bends in steep places. Dazzlingly whitened by long exposure to heat, blue and deep green in their shadows, these seracs rose in a chaotic jumble to forty or fifty feet in height, and tracking a way between them was a wearisome process, involving many false starts and detours round unclimbable obstacles. The going was made harder by the peculiar vaporous nature of the air, caused by the sweating of the ice in the strong ultra-violet rays of the sun ; this vapour induced a mental and physical sluggishness which came to be known as glacier lassitude. As they reached the foot of the precipice falling from the North-West Ridge a single glance told them that this ridge could be ruled out as a route to the summit. The North-East Ridge—the one which is so conspicuous from the south—appeared to present a route that would “go”—it rose in a reasonably gradual slope for three-quarters of a mile—but it was obvious that to reach it from the Rongbuk Glacier would be a herculean task, as it would mean ascending a terrible ice-fall. The Nepalese side of the mountain, plunging down in barbarous cliffs, was even less of a proposition, apart from the fact that it was tabooed territory. Was there, then, any way of reaching the ridge ? If not, then the mountain would have to be given up as invulnerable. There was, how-

ever, one gleam of hope. From a subsidiary peak to the west, they saw that a "col"—a sweeping neck of snow-covered rock, afterwards known as the North Col—connected the North-East Shoulder with the North Peak. If this col, inaccessible from where they stood, could be reached from the farther side—the east—it looked as though the one important breach in the mountain's defences was discovered.

These explorations, simple and straightforward enough on paper, occupied five weeks, and by the time the party returned to the new Base Camp at Kharta they were all badly in need of a rest. After the noble but sternly inhospitable purlieus of Everest the sweet-smelling airs, the pastures and woods and wild life of Kharta were most comforting; but Mallory and Bullock, with that crucial problem of a way to the Col still unsettled, were too impatient to loiter more than a few days. Pushing off again, they made their way up the enchanting valley of Kama, rich with juniper and magnolia, a scenic gem with, for setting, the ethereal silver and sapphire of Chomolönzo and Makalu, two of Everest's sister peaks. Some six weeks of untiring exploration at last sorted out the radiating and twisting valleys and glaciers of Everest, and at length the way was found. This was the East Rongbuk Glacier, the stairway by which all subsequent expeditions have ascended to the North Col. Separated from the main Rongbuk Glacier by the North Col and the North Peak, the East Rongbuk Glacier flows eastward and then swings round to the west to meet the main Rongbuk Glacier: owing to its change of direction Mallory had not previously thought that it issued from Everest.

From the head of the East Rongbuk Glacier rises a massive, steeply hanging ice-wall, rough and crevassed, the crest of which is the North Col, highway to the

North-East Shoulder. Mallory, Bullock and Wheeler pitched tents at the foot of this wall (22,000 feet), slept a night (slept, that is, as far as the flaying cold and the onslaughts of wind squalls against the tents allowed), and then set out to join battle with the ice-wall. The climbing lay over ice drifted with half-frozen snow, and did not seriously tax the abilities of such seasoned mountaineers. In the final two hundred feet, however, the wall steepens and the snow dislodges easily: here the ice axes came into play, and in all five hundred steps were cut before the Col was reached.

The cutting of steps is entitled to rank within the category of Skilled Occupations. The tyro makes a bungling, exhausting job of it. The expert knows to a nicety the force of the blow required, to cut inwards and slightly downwards. The ideal is to cut the step with accuracy and a minimum of exertion. But the task is much more tiring in the Himalaya than in the Alps, owing to the fact that the enormously solid ice grows rubbery with age, and after each stroke the axe has to be wrenched out.

From the North Col Mallory's earlier impression that the way up the Face Edge and North-East Ridge was feasible received ample confirmation. He found himself wondering whether this purely exploratory expedition might not, after all, have a "shot" at the summit. The climbers ascended a little way and found the Face Edge neither particularly steep nor tricky. But they had a foretaste of the vicious winds which all Everest climbers have experienced above the Col. The lowest temperature on Everest is scarcely more severe than those encountered by Arctic explorers; but the ferocity of her winds is devilish and unique. In spite of camel-hair underclothing, woollen sweaters and jackets, windproof blouse and trousers, the wind struck through to their very bones.

Sheets of snow were whipped up off the Face Edge and driven down the farther slope in a maniac fury ; and the upper parts of the mountain were darkly veiled. The scene was impressive and menacing in the extreme. Glad enough were they to hurry to shelter ; glad, too, after their weeks of toil and strain, to indulge once again in the comforts of the Base Camp. The monsoon weather was at hand ; the job of tackling the mountain itself must perforce be left to a future expedition. Meanwhile they could look forward, now that their work was satisfactorily completed, to the genial airs, the trim fields and happy leisure of England.

Everest had been explored, her best approach located, her one defensive weakness tested, thousands of square miles mapped by the surveyors ; now to push home the advantage. A second expedition was speedily organized, and within a year the assault was under way. This expedition was equipped with oxygen gas to counteract the rarity of the air at the highest altitudes. Many climbers were against the use of oxygen. It was, they said, taking an unfair advantage of the mountain. It was not playing the game. As well might one facilitate a climb by removing the difficult sections of a cliff with dynamite ! Others disputed this. All weapons were fair, they said, against a mountain so adamant as Everest. Moreover, it was by no means certain that men would need artificial aids to reach the summit. The 1921 expedition had shown that when breathing became difficult the body, by a mysterious process known, for want of a better word, as "acclimatization," gradually adapted itself to the changed conditions by the manufacture of extra blood corpuscles ; after a few days the climbers, providing they were not overworked, found themselves able to put up with—and indeed take for

granted—conditions which they had previously found insupportable. But the Mount Everest Committee was determined to take no risks. In spite of an estimate of Mallory's that the chance of conquering the mountain was only one in fifty, they believed that the summit, or some point near it, was attainable; and the plain fact was that no one knew whether the unaided human lungs could subsist at 29,000 feet. There was a general belief that a climbing party with oxygen would go farther than one without. The plan of operations was that a non-oxygen party should make a first assault and be followed by a party with oxygen.

The expedition was led by Brigadier-General the Hon. C. G. Bruce, a man whose experience of Himalayan climbing was long and varied, and whose cheery, prankish ways won the affection of all who knew him. Expeditions to the Himalaya, where altitude causes illness and frequent ill-tempers, and where men of varying tastes and habits are thrown together in the closest proximity, depend a great deal for their harmony upon the character and sympathy of their leaders. At once a manly man and a boyish boy, a born organizer and an understanding friend, Bruce was the very man to draw the best from his colleagues. His insight into the minds of the hill peoples—the Gurkhas, Sherpas and Tibetans—was profound, and they in turn reciprocated his understanding with an unquestioning trust. Though his climbing days were over, and he would not proceed beyond the Base Camp, his generalship and the impetus of his personality would be the welding-force of the expedition.

For the climbing parties, the first choice was obviously Mallory. He had distinguished himself so well in 1921 that an Everest expedition without him was unthinkable. Four others were Norton, Somervell, Morshead and Finch. All were renowned mountaineers. Lieutenant-

Colonel E. F. Norton, a soldier with soldierly bearing and habits, quiet and collected in his manner, was obviously destined to go far on Everest. Dr. Howard Somervell, skilful surgeon, artist and musician, had loved mountains ever since, as a boy living in the old grey town of Kendal, he had gone on solitary excursions into the Lake District hills. A member of a gifted family whose business concerns have a long and honourable tradition, he was essentially a man of fine integrity and idealism, yet withal a delightfully cheery spirit. He could be relied upon to meet any adversities with quiet courage. Captain George Finch and Major H. T. Morshead were two other excellent climbers of wide experience—the first in the Alps, the second in the Himalaya, and Morshead had been in charge of the surveying operations of the previous expedition. These were to be the advance climbers, the storm troops as it were. Among the other members of the party was Captain Noel, the first European to penetrate within forty miles of Everest, a fearless and highly intelligent explorer and a charming companion. Noel was not a mountaineer, his rôle was that of official photographer; and, working under the most trying conditions, he succeeded in obtaining a host of graphic film and "still" pictures.

After the long march over the arid plains of Tibet the party, thanks chiefly to better cooking than that of the previous year, reached the Rongbuk Valley in good health and spirits and with its numbers undepleted. The Base Camp was laid on a moraine—a patch of desolate stony ground, high above the last limits of vegetation—at the entrance to the glacier. The task now was to establish a chain of camps, if possible up to 27,000 feet, and from the highest camp make a raid upon the summit. There were only a few short weeks available before the arrival of the monsoon: the seasonal wind which, sweep-

ing across India from the Bay of Bengal, scourges the mountains with hail and snow and makes climbing impossible.

The method employed was the "polar" one. After four or five hours' march a camp is laid and climbers installed: a position won. Porters return to the Base and bring up provisions and gear: position consolidated. Another four hours' march, another camp: second position gained. Camp equipped and provisioned: second position consolidated. And so on. Every camp is made as self-supporting as possible, but lines of communication are maintained: there must be no risk of an advance party being cut off by bad weather or illness. So the work went on, the wiry porters making journey after journey up the glacier: smooth progress, deliberate, routined in every detail. Camps I and II were laid at 17,800 and 19,800 feet respectively; Camp III, the last of the preliminary camps, was established near the foot of the North Col slope.

And strangely enough, as they plodded up through this waste of ice and stones, they found life. Spiders and beetles were discovered among the rocks up to 22,000 feet—folded, comatose, sleeping out their long winter hibernation. What they eat no one knows—for at that height there is not a particle of vegetation. If they live by eating each other, as seems certain, the mystery is how the race manages to survive. Above Camp III two companionable choughs nested and hatched their young on an ice-ledge. What queer impulse drives these creatures out of the valleys into such inhospitable regions? Is it company they seek? There is no telling; but it seems probable, for in 1924 choughs followed Mallory and Irvine to their camp at 27,000 feet, and climbers say that if ever a camp is set up on the summit the crows will not be long in following.

Now the real climbing could begin, ambition seize its long-awaited opportunity. The porters were almost as excited at the prospect as the climbers: they even laid bets with each other as to which of the Sahibs would go farthest, with Finch and Mallory as neck-and-neck "favourites"!

On May 13th Mallory and Somervell, with a porter carrying a single tent, set out for the Col, and after a morning's labour ropes were strung up the slope, fixed to the ice by wooden pegs. The first position on the mountain was won. But ominous slate-grey clouds were boiling up out of the Kama Valley. The monsoon was evidently ahead of its appointment. Bad weather was a certainty. It would be a race against time.

Additional tents were carried up to the Col and securely anchored in the snow. This was Camp IV. For a few days there was a busy come and go of porters, bringing up the varied paraphernalia of camp life: sleeping-bags, spare clothes, primus stoves, cameras and domestic utensils, and the manifold necessities of the inner man — tea, cocoa, soups, ham, cheese, sausages, jams and other foodstuffs.

On May 20th Mallory, Morshead Somervell and Norton, with nine porters carrying loads of twenty pounds each, started out from the Col to set up Camp V as far up the mountain as possible. The sun was shining and the air calm, but as they went higher the cold grew very penetrating and they had to halt to put on additional clothes. Norton was sitting with his rucksack balanced in his lap, when suddenly it slipped over, eluded his desperate grasp, and went bounding from ledge to ledge down the mountain and out of sight. Mallory mutely bade good-bye to an excellent pair of pyjama legs which Norton had borrowed from him.

At about eleven o'clock they reached 25,000 feet.



TOWARDS THE SUMMIT
From 27,000 feet

Clouds now settled over the mountain, and for two hours the climbers groped about on the steep rock slopes before they hit upon a site for Camp V. A tilted ledge of rock situated at the foot of a large slab, it was no haven of rest ; but they could not afford to waste time in further search, so they built a rough platform of stones, pitched their tents, sent back the porters to the North Col, devoured some tinned food, and settled in.

The ingenious Mallory slept with his boots under his head to keep them from freezing, though this unaccommodating pillow scarcely helped him to sleep. He and Norton shared a sleeping-bag ; it was a tight fit, and Mallory disconsolately marvelled at the amount of room taken up by his far from corpulent bedmate !

Snow fell during the night, and they awoke to find the mountain drenched in mist. Morshead, who had omitted to wear his wind-proof over-suiting on the first part of the climb, was weak and shivery, and some of his fingers were frostbitten. Frostbite is the bane of every Himalayan expedition. In its acute stage it kills the tissues and blood corpuscles, and causes gangrene ; should sepsis set in, amputation is imperative to prevent its spreading. It was clear that Morshead should go no higher. The others went on without him, up the rock slopes towards the North-East Ridge. The climbing presented few technical obstacles, but they were much hampered by the difficulty of breathing. Steady, regular movements and deep intakes through the mouth—sucking into the lungs as much oxygen as possible—and frequent rests of several minutes, were a help. There was a delay while Mallory, one of whose feet had gone numb owing to the over-tightness of the boot, stopped to have the foot chafed back to life by Norton. Long before mid-day they knew beyond any doubt that their rate of progress was woefully inadequate for the attainment of the summit.

At 2.30, at a point just under the North-East Shoulder, having reached 26,985 feet—the highest level then achieved by climbers—they halted, tacitly agreeing to go no farther. They were not “whacked,” but as wise mountaineers they chose to keep some reserve of strength for the descent.

They had a snack, and then someone produced a flask of brandy. Though they knew that medical opinion frowns upon the use of alcoholic stimulants at high altitudes, each was glad to take a sip, for all were chilled and thirsty. (There are no refreshing streams to drink from on Everest : the snow does not melt, it only evaporates.) Mallory humorously observed that the brandy could not possibly have contained any alcohol, inasmuch as they all felt better for taking it ! Then as they made a move to descend, Somervell said :

“ You fellows go ahead. I’ll catch you up soon.”

“ What the dickens do you want to stay behind for ? ” Norton asked.

“ I want to make a sketch.”

The impossible fellow meant to start fiddling with pencil and paper at nearly 27,000 feet, in air cold enough to freeze the fingers off ! They gaped at him. Then Mallory found speech—explosively.

“ But I won’t take more than a few minutes,” Somervell said in surprise.

“ Drat your sketching ! Come on ! ” Mallory growled. Somervell smiled forgivingly, and the three started the descent.

But Somervell’s artistic impulse is highly significant. That a man at the terrific altitude of 27,000 feet can keep his artistic awareness of scenery, is not only proof of his own fine-mindedness, but an unmistakable indication of the way men can keep their faculties alert even when heart and lungs are fighting to remain alive. It is a still

clearer indication that some day men will breathe and see and *think* even on the summit itself.

At Camp V they found Morshead's condition sufficiently grave to justify taking him down to the North Col without delay. It was risky. All were tired, and evening was drawing on ; there is practically no twilight on Everest, and the last stages of the journey would have to be covered in darkness. But no one thought of the risk. Taking it in turns to support the sick man, they groped their way down yard by yard, surrounded by grey clouds from which flickered ominous lightning. Darkness descended abruptly. The feeble light of a candle carried by Somervell aided them. The way-finding was unanimously left to Somervell, but even his highly trained mountain sense more than once went astray. Now down a snow-slope : step-cutting by candlelight, supporting Morshead while he crawled down step by step. Then a crevasse : a fifteen-feet drop on to a dimly seen patch of snow. Would the snow hold ? It was problematic. They hesitated. But it had to be chanced. They were too far spent to search for a way round the crevasse. One jumped. It held. The others followed. Then Somervell said : "The candle is nearly finished," and presently it guttered out. The darkness was profound ; the night was starless ; but their way over the snow could be dimly made out. They were all in a parlous state by now. But they dared not take the risk of hurrying. It was 11.30 when they reached the North Col camp. How their stomachs craved for food, their bone-dry mouths for a hot drink ! And then the luxury of crawling, replete and half asleep, between the cosy eiderdown of the sleeping-bags ! But a cruel disappointment was in store for them. Arrangements had miscarried, the porters going down to Camp III had taken the cooking apparatus. Calamity overwhelming,

positively the last straw! Fretfully they consumed the only semblance of liquid refreshment they could find—frozen tinned milk beaten up with jam and snow. A loathsome mixture, but at least it was sweet, and altitude climbers crave for sweet things, sugar to stoke up the blood, “quick fuel” as Mallory called it. (But on this occasion at least he regretted his indulgence, for after he had insinuated himself into his sleeping-bag, dejectedly to await the morning and the descent from the Col, he was seized with stomach-pains.)

Four days later came the turn of the oxygen party—Finch and Geoffrey Bruce, cousin of Brigadier-General Bruce. Finch was an enthusiast for the oxygen gas, believing that its tonic effect would outweigh the disadvantage of the weight of the apparatus. This was considerable—about thirty pounds—for a single cylinder lasted only an hour and a half, and it was necessary to carry a good supply of spares.

At midday they encamped at a point a trifle higher than the previous party’s Camp V, on a precarious ledge overlooking the Rongbuk Glacier. The night was a wild one. Frequently the wind whipped the ground-sheet and its human burden clean off the ground. Snow drove through the crannies of the canvas, percolating into clothes and sleeping-bags. Ever and again the two climbers and Tejbir, the porter they had retained to carry the extra oxygen cylinders, had to crawl out and, crouching on the edge of nothingness, tighten the guy lines and pile up more stones to prevent the wind from snatching up their tent and hurling it into space. So searing was the cold and so baffling the wind that no one dared remain outside the tent for more than a few minutes at a time. When a spirit lamp was lighted to warm food, the incoming gusts so blew the flame about that their shelter,

literally the only barrier between them and death, was in danger of catching fire. The obvious course was to retreat as soon as the weather allowed. They were desperately tempted, and a retreat at such a juncture would have been no shame. But they were reluctant to abandon the position they had won, and so they decided to throw their lives in the balance and wait another day.

The hours dragged wearily by, until, during a lull in the wind, they heard voices outside. It proved to be porters, who had braved the storm to bring them food and thermos flasks of hot drink. One of the discomforts of high-altitude life is that water boils at a very low temperature—at boiling-point hands could be plunged into it without risk of scalding—and so the stimulus of a piping-hot drink is denied.

The next day brought no slackening of the gale. For a second night the hand-to-hand struggle with the elements went on, until the effort, the nerve-strain and the shortage of nourishment reduced them to exhaustion. From time to time they had recourse to the oxygen. The porters had affected to despise oxygen, the “English air” as they called it. But in this extremity Tejbir was as thankful for it as his masters, and all shook off their depression for a time as they inhaled the life-giving gas.

The following daybreak the wind dropped sufficiently to permit a start, and in spite of great weariness and hunger they set out, knowing the summit unattainable but implacably determined to go as high as possible. At 26,000 feet Tejbir staggered and fell heavily on his face, smashing the delicate oxygen cylinders beneath him.

“I’m done,” he groaned.

Bruce and Finch assisted him to his feet and sustained him with their arms. Finch started to berate him for breaking the precious cylinders: then a glance at the man’s ashen face checked him. Tejbir had patently

reached the end of his tether. (In passing, is it permissible to doubt whether it is in the best interests of sportmanship to drive these poor fellows to such harrowing exertions in a cause which is not theirs?)

"Can you find your way back?" they asked him.

"I—I think so."

"Alone?"

"Yes, Sahib."

"That's good. It's easy going. But be careful. Wait at Camp V if you can't get any farther."

They watched him descending for a few minutes, and then, unroped, struck across the Face, going well in spite of the precipitous nature of the rocks. Bruce was not in the technical sense a mountain climber, but he was moving with a sure and confident instinct. Occasionally they stopped to change a cylinder and throw away the exhausted one, glad to think there were no anti-litter laws on Everest.

Suddenly Bruce, who was in the rear, sank to his knees and called out:

"Finch, the gas has failed!"

Finch hurried down the steep rock ledge he had been ascending. Bruce was on his knees, sagging slowly forward, and Finch caught him just as he was on the point of falling over towards the precipice below.

"Here, take this," he said. "Quick!"

He detached Bruce's oxygen apparatus and thrust into his gasping mouth the delivery tube of his own. Sharing this in short spells with his companion, he began the testing of Bruce's apparatus—the steel of which was almost unbearably cold to the touch—but was unable to locate the fault. He too was growing dizzy from the shortage of gas. (The natural air which had kept Somervell and Norton going was of no use to a man who had been breathing artificial oxygen.) So he connected a

spare tube with his own cylinders so that the two could inhale simultaneously, and turned on the maximum flow. This revived them both and enabled Finch to locate and remedy the defect in Bruce's apparatus.

But the accident brought their fine climb to a standstill. They were at 27,300 feet, with the goal looking deceptively near and inviting. They could actually distinguish individual stones just below the summit. They had gone well past the highest point reached by the previous party: each climb was adding another cubit to the general achievement. But they were in no condition to go farther, and another accident to the oxygen apparatus might have very grave consequences. Their spirit was strong enough, but hard reality insisted that there was nothing for it but to give the mountain "best."

"Just you wait, old thing. We'll get you yet!" said Bruce, shaking his fist at the summit. Then they turned back.

It was intended to make another oxygen attempt before the monsoon broke. There was just time. But this plan was frustrated by a shocking accident. The North Col was layered with fresh snow, which had filled in the old tracks. Mallory, Somervell and another climber, Crawford, went ahead to stamp out a track for the fourteen laden porters who were following. The morning was bright and still, the early sun seemed to have bound the snow firmly to the ice beneath. There was nothing to indicate the possibility of an accident. They had ascended a third of the way when, without warning, there came a loud sound of tearing and splitting, with a dull threatening undertone. Snow was rushing in ever-increasing volume down the exposed slope. The climbers were knocked off their feet, flung forward, engulfed in a roaring torrent of snow. A few minutes of convulsive

struggle—labouring lungs, swimming-like movement of the arms, rapid thought “I’m done for”—then the avalanche eased up, stilled. Silence. Breathless and half stunned, they struggled to their feet. In a tearing anxiety they hurried down to ascertain what had happened to the porters. A group of these were crouching at the edge of a cliff where the force of the avalanche had landed them, jabbering incoherently and too terrified to move. The nine men who had been lowest on the slope had been carried over this cliff, which was eighty feet high, and swept down into deep snow. The climbers worked their way round to the foot of the cliff and hastily started to extricate the victims with their axes. Overwhelmed by this disaster, the surviving porters stood watching with dull, hopeless expressions on their faces. Urged to help in the rescue work, they only shrugged their shoulders and muttered :

“ What is the use ? ”

“ But,” protested the rescuers, “ they are your comrades.”

“ What of it ? ” they said with the strange fatalism of their race. “ They are dead by now. The demons of the mountain have slain them. There is nothing we can do.”

“ But—their bodies——”

“ What do dead bodies matter ? ”

But the Sahibs persisted in their efforts to dig out the dead. Five feet down in the snow, Mallory’s axe struck against a boot, and presently a man was dragged out, unconscious, but still breathing. Although he had been entombed for an hour he recovered. A second man was disinterred, and he also recovered. Several others, who had fallen against the ice-wall, had been killed instantly ; others were buried too deep to find and had to be left. In all the avalanche had taken a toll of seven lives.

Though no one was to blame—repeated tests had deceived the climbers into thinking the snow was safe—it was none the less a distressing end to an expedition which had endured and achieved so much. A climbing party cannot help regarding an accident to its servants as a slur upon itself. But if there was any atonement to make, it was made fully and finely on this same ice-wall two years later, when the following expedition, at the risk of their own lives, saved four porters from certain death.

CHAPTER IV

TRAGEDY

CRISP sunlight was creeping up the mountain as Norton and Somervell opened the flap of the high-altitude tent and looked out. Tempest had raged all night, and the stiffened canvas of their tiny bivouac, pegged down on a floor of loose rubble, had cracked and tugged so frenziedly that ever and again they had to crawl out and, with feelingless fingers, drive in the pegs to tauten the ropes. Yet at 27,000 feet—nearly 1,000 feet higher than the highest camp in 1922, and 11,000 feet higher than the summit of Mount Blanc—they had defied the petrifying cold of the air and slept.

Crawling stiffly out of the sleeping-bags, they made a sketchy meal, washed the dishes as best they could with snow—household thoroughness was a point of honour with the Everest climbers, even at the highest camps—and before seven they were plodding up the slope of the North Face. Behind them, on the lower slopes and down the glacier beds, the mists of morning were swirling and shredding out in milky streamers before the sun's invasion. Ahead, the snows were twinkling between the cold blue shadows of the rocks. Beyond, white-clad, severe and pure, was the summit cone—top of the world, centre and image of their ambition. A morning of hope. Everest in one of her rare tranquil moods.

Hard going on the North Face. The rocks, steep and slabby, overlapped like steel plates—descending, each plate projected *beneath* the other, so that the nailed boots gripped with difficulty. Such snow as lodged in the interstices was floury, not compacted yet by the sun: tricky stuff that required constant vigilance. The very



BOOTS

Worn by Dr Somervell on his climb with Norton, 1924

sunlight seemed to sting their thickly greased faces ; the sun himself was powerless against the polar breath of Everest. Before they had gone many yards they were resting after every few paces. Each movement of arm and leg set the heart galloping as if after a hundred yards' sprint : as they panted for breath they could hear the air whistling through their lungs. Shrunken lungs, threatened with very extinction, fighting desperately to draw nourishment from an atmosphere weighing only a third of its sea-level weight, drained almost dry of oxygen. . . .

Struggling and gasping, they advance in short, slow spurts to five hundred feet. Rests become increasingly prolonged. Seven hundred and fifty feet. Their lips feel stiff : the saliva drying in their mouths causes an agonizing thirst. Somervell is coughing. A sore throat contracted on the glacier—hotbed of dank deadening airs, subtle enemy of health—doubles him up with harsh, hacking coughs. It feels as though his very lungs were rending. Presently he stops, stoops over his ice axe, gasps to Norton :

“ I’m—licked Norton.”

“ I’ll help you back to camp,” Norton says.

“ No. Carry on. You must not turn back now.”

“ But you’re ill.”

“ I’ll be all right. I need a rest, that’s all.”

So Norton trudges on.

There comes an even more convulsive burst of coughing, and Somervell feels his throat close up as if choked by a great lump. He cannot get his breath. His head swims and everything blurs before his eyes. Sinking down in the snow, he thinks, “ Done for.” Then with a last frenzied access of strength he hammers his chest. The obstacle clears. Ah, the relief ! He spits weakly. The saliva reddens the snow. Blood. He has torn a membrane.

Presently he bethinks himself of his camera. So weak and spent is he that the idea of photography is intolerable. It means fishing out the camera from his rucksack, baring his fingers, focussing, putting away the camera, doing up the straps . . . a pestersome and futile business. But, fighting down his lassitude, he gets out the camera, sights the summit—difficult to hold the camera steady against the heaving of his chest—and then, *Click!* It is a miraculous photograph—the first to be taken at the height of 28,000 feet. It shows Norton, stooped under the weight of his rucksack, feeling his way along the slabs, and beyond, the summit with its perpetual snow: a scene of overwhelming desolation.

Norton, meanwhile, forges doggedly on, trembling the while as with a fever. He stops to test his pulse. Above normal. His limbs are leaden, the evil force of Everest seems to be dragging him back at every step. *You shall go no farther*, she seems to say. Presently his fatigued brain begins to play tricks. He jerks aside to avoid boulders which are not there. Delusions! Bad sign. More than once a foot slips and he recovers himself by the instinctive balance of the climber. For an hour he goes on. Pausing to look back, he sees Somervell sitting in the snow. Heavens, how near he still is! Hopeless to go on. There, before and above him, is the summit, a mere thousand feet away, tantalizingly close, impossibly far. He has reached the couloir now, the deep gully which cuts down the mountain face from under the summit cone. The couloir is choked with powdery snow, into which he sinks to the waist. Treacherous. A slip now will shoot him down to the foot of the mountain. He is trembling uncontrollably—he wonders if this is the onset of malaria—and at each gust of wind he sways drunkenly. With gritted teeth he goes on. Ten paces, a rest. Ten paces, a rest. Crawling, groping progress

from ledge to crack, like an ant struggling up the side of a tiled bath, and all the time, felt rather than seen, that colossal precipice beneath, and the glacier waiting to receive his broken body. His life now depends upon nothing more than the friction of his boot nails against the rock. . . .

He consults his watch. One o'clock. At this speed of ascent the summit will take three hours. The prize is not, after all, to be his. But in his exhausted state success and failure have ceased to count. Nor has he eyes for the mountains around him, cloud-shouldering titans which are now nevertheless below his own level. Nothing matters but to turn back. . . .

As he approaches Somervell his nerve breaks down completely: he has reached a steep traverse layered with thin snow—a far less dangerous piece of ground than some he has already crossed—and suddenly his overwrought brain pictures with appalling distinctness the result of a false step. He calls to Somervell to help him. The attenuated air makes his voice little more than a whisper, but at length he makes Somervell hear. Somervell throws him a rope and the danger is past.

So down to Camp VI, which they collapse and weight with stones after collecting some of their belongings. It was after sunset when Camp V was passed, and they had to fumble their way down the Face to the Col by the aid of Norton's torch. At last, shadowy in the starlight, the tents of the North Col camp were revealed. Norton shouted. Presently answering shouts were heard:

“We are bringing up oxygen.”

“Confound your oxygen!” Norton replied. “It's a *drink* we want.”

His words finished on a croak.

The last hundred feet of the descent took nearly an hour, and so near to collapse were they when they reached

the camp that even tea and soup failed to rouse any enthusiasm, and it was with weary thankfulness that they crawled into their sleeping-bags. But they were not destined to sleep : Somervell's cough was worse, and Norton spent the night, and many nights to come, in an agony of snow-blindness.

This splendid failure was the first of the 1924 expedition's attacks upon the mountain. From the beginning the expedition was ill-starred. General Bruce, the leader, contracted malaria during the crossing of Tibet and had to be sent back. His loss was a serious one, and upon Lieutenant-Colonel Norton devolved the burden of responsibility for the arrangements and plan of attack.

Norton, Mallory, Somervell and Geoffrey Bruce were the members who had been in the previous expedition. Of the new recruits we may note N. E. Odell and Andrew Irvine. Odell was a geologist as well as a climber, and was hoping to find valuable fossils on the mountain. Irvine was the " baby " of the expedition, and no one quite knew how he would turn out. He was only twenty-two—the accredited age for high-altitude climbing is the early thirties—and had done little climbing, but he had a magnificent physique and had distinguished himself in the Oxford Spitzbergen Expedition the previous year. His gay and gallant spirit made him much liked. Mallory in especial was strongly drawn to him, and before Everest was reached took him on several minor climbs to coach him in mountain craft.

The expedition reached the site of the old Base Camp on April 28th in brilliant calm weather. But Everest lost no time in extending her characteristic welcome. No sooner was the camp erected than a dense snowstorm came down, and for the next fortnight the laying of camps up to the foot of the North Col was carried out in much

severer conditions than the previous expeditions had experienced at this stage. The temperature fell to thirty below zero. The glacier trough was sheeted with brittle snow beneath which lurked treacherous cavities. The weather worsened as they drew nearer to the mountain, and so cutting was the cold that the special sleeping-bags intended for the attack parties had to be used in the glacier camps. The load-carriers suffered greatly, and there were outbursts of ill-feeling among themselves which could only be pacified by delicate tact. Yet their endurance was splendid. Men, women and boys—150 locals in addition to the regular porters—toiled back and forward in that inhuman wilderness bearing loads of Alpine equipment, cooking utensils, scientific and medical stores, oxygen gear, cameras and the like. One woman carried a forty-pound load, with her baby straddled on top, and with this immense burden tramped over the ice and snow without a grumble. At night they would sleep in their bokkus, and should this get crusted with snow they took it, on the whole, in good part.

Yet even the stamina of the hillmen has its limit, and those two arduous weeks sapped their resistance and virtually doomed the expedition to failure. Sleep was rendered impossible by the howling of the blizzard and the flapping of the tents. The porters grew too dispirited even to cook for themselves, preferring to lie in a torpor and let come what may. One man was frostbitten, another was dying of pneumonia, a third had a clot on the brain. The Sahibs, as they watched the snow whirled by the gale in a screaming witch-dance over the North Col, had to face the disquieting fact that, for the present at least, any further advance was out of the question. Norton, therefore, reluctantly—for to turn one's back on a mountain amounts to moral defeat—ordered a withdrawal. The toil of portage had to begin all over again.

Tents were struck and packed, bedding and equipment dumped, and then, carrying such stores as were unsafe to leave on the glacier, the party, fatigued and crestfallen, turned their backs on Everest and returned to the Base. Even at this lower altitude, and in the greater comfort of the larger tents, the cold was still very discomforting. Mallory imprecated the weather when the ink froze in his fountain-pen as he posted up his diary.

Realizing that after their trying experiences the porters were in need of some outside stimulus to restore their morale, Norton took them down to the Rongbuk Monastery, where the Lama touched their heads with his sacred praying wheel and gave them his blessing. He urged them to be faithful and not to falter, and promised to pray for the success of their enterprise. And when their return to the Base Camp was signalized by a day of fine weather, those simple spirits recovered all their cheerfulness and conviction. But precious time had been lost. The scheme of advancing with military thoroughness, pushing forward the base depot, consolidating every inch of ground won, allowing the assault parties ample time for acclimatization, was no longer workable. The climbers' plan now was to re-establish the glacier camps as expeditiously as possible, and make dashes for the summit in relays before the onset of the monsoon. It is always that way on Everest: the sacrifice of thoroughness to expediency. But "this retreat", Mallory declared with buoyant optimism, "is only a setback. The issue must shortly be decided. The next time we walk up the glacier will be the last." Alas, he did not know how tragically true the words were in his own case.

The ascent of the glacier was made in better conditions than before, and by the 19th of May Camp III was occupied and provisioned. Next day the attack upon the ice-cliff to the Col was launched. Avoiding the

dangerous slopes on which the 1922 avalanche occurred, Mallory, Norton and Odell worked their way up a "chimney"—a crack sixty feet high—clinging to knobs and ledges while they hacked steps. A rope ladder was suspended, and above the chimney, on the steep 200 feet to the ledge on which Camp IV was to be established, a rope was fixed to wooden pickets. The way was now clear for the load-carriers.

The following evening, after a gruelling day spent in hauling up the loads, Hazard, a reserve climber, with twelve porters "moved in" at Camp IV, on the ledge below the Col. The weather grew evil; the tents, though sheltered, were pitched on snow and were bitterly cold; and two days later Hazard evacuated the camp. Eight porters descended the cliff with him. The other four—of whom two were frostbitten—chose to stay at the camp rather than face the sheer slope leading down to the chimney. Norton was alarmed. The men must not, on any account, be left marooned. It was imperative to bring them down, or they would perish of hunger and exhaustion. But the risks! New snow lay deep on the ice, crevasses were frozen over, and there would be great danger of falling into their awesome depths. The new snow would make the going arduous, and avalanches were more than likely. Mallory was of the opinion that the chance of reaching the stranded men was, against such obstacles, more than remote. Norton knew, too, that the fatigue and nerve strain of such an undertaking would seriously weaken his best climbers and diminish the prospect of reaching the summit. But none but the fittest climbers could essay this task, and he did not hesitate. The mountain must wait. Human lives came first. So those indispensable stalwarts, Norton, Somervell and Mallory, set out. They must have known that some of their comrades did not expect their return.

Seldom has any expedition experienced such setbacks, conquests and disasters ; but this rescue—carried out in the teeth of such odds—stands out as one of the supreme achievements in the saga of Everest. Roped, the three men trudged over the glacier, treading warily, one at a time, over snow-bridged crevasses, until they reached the base of the ice-cliff. They took the lead in turns. The snow was deep and soft, often reaching up to their knees, and the treadmill grind of dragging their legs out after every step caused them to gasp and cough. Bodies and brains quickly tired, but the most intense concentration had to be maintained, for a slip would have caused an avalanche and the whole party would have been swept away. It took them five hours to reach the foot of the chimney. Here the steps were obliterated, but after fumbling for a while in the snow they found the frozen but friendly rope. Above the chimney was the hardest part of all—the almost vertical 200 feet to the camp ledge. Somervell now took the lead, cutting steps as he went, while the others paid out the rope after first anchoring it round axes driven into the snow. With wonderful coolness and deliberation, considering his tired state and the dire risk of a fall, Somervell worked his way up until he was within a dozen yards of the ledge. Here the rope gave out. Somervell drove in his axe and fastened the rope to it, so that there was now a rail of tight rope to which the porters could cling. The four marooned men were now visible on the ledge. Somervell called to them to come down to him one by one. After much persuasion—for the poor fellows were weary and ill and seemed no longer to care whether they perished or not—two reached him and were passed along the rope in safety to Norton. The other two, making the mistake of descending together, dislodged a patch of snow ; there was a yell, and the next moment they were rolling down the

slope in a cascade of snow. By a miracle a patch of firmer surface checked their fall. Somervell had to go down to them on a rope and haul them up by the scruff of the neck to a safer quarter.

Evening was approaching and it was vital to get down with all speed. Repeatedly the rescued men slipped, and only by the most consummate mountain craft was the doom of the whole party averted. When they reached the glacier—a quarter of a mile from the camp—it was starlight. Physical and nervous prostration was so great that they were scarcely able to stand, but somehow they stumbled onward until they saw a light on the glacier and heard calls. They called in return. Shortly they were met by Noel and Odell, who were carrying hot soup. They sank down in the snow utterly dead beat. They could speak only in hoarse whispers. Mallory was in the worst state, though Norton was little better. The porters were in the last stage of exhaustion. For twenty-four hours they had lived in terrible cold, foodless and in dread of the mountain, and their resistance was drained. In addition, one was seriously frostbitten.

The weather continuing to be bad, and the general condition of the climbers leaving much to be desired, Norton ordered a second evacuation of Camp III, and the entire body, lame and distressed, fought their way in the face of a blizzard to the lower camps.

There were now so few porters available—only fifteen out of fifty were fit to carry loads—that it was decided that Norton and Somervell should make a non-oxygen attempt on the summit. Meanwhile the second pair of climbers, Mallory and Irvine, would rest. Mallory looked ill and worn, though such was his cheerfulness and willingness to undertake any task, that it would have been difficult to say just how bad he actually was. He spent

most of his time in his sleeping-bag, writing diaries and letters, but at the slightest hint that his services were required he was out of bed in a trice and, smiling his handsome smile, going about the job with a spirit and address that were truly wonderful. Somervell was weakened by throat trouble, but he too rose to every occasion. Perhaps the fittest man was young Irvine: within that muscular figure of his there seemed to lie inexhaustible reserves of energy. Hour by hour he worked on the oxygen appliances, which were giving trouble. There was a strong mechanical strain in him, and he tinkered at the cylinders and feed tubes with almost mystical enthusiasm.

On June 2nd Camp V was established by Mallory and Geoffrey Bruce at 25,000 feet, and on the 3rd Norton and Somervell, in fairly good weather conditions, had climbed from the Col to 27,000 feet, where they pitched a tent in a cleft among some rocks—the highest camp yet pitched on Everest. Their climb to this camp site was filmed by Captain Noel, who lugged his cinematograph camera to the top of a promontory on the opposite side of the East Rongbuk Glacier.

We know how Norton and Somervell returned. They had been very near to disaster. If Somervell had collapsed, as he almost did, Norton could not have got him down in his own weakened state. Both men were at that point of moral defeat when a return to the Col, unfriended and unaided, would have been superhuman. As it was, Norton, in an agony of blindness, had to be helped down to Camp III on the glacier by Dr. Hingston, who, though he had never been on the ice-cliff before, ascended to the Col and guided the unfortunate climber down by placing Norton's feet with his own hands in each step: an ordeal nerve-wrackingly dangerous for both.

Now it was the turn of Mallory and Irvine.



ON THE GLACIER

East Rongbuk Seracs

Mallory, though far from fit, was undoubtedly in a belligerent mood. As a member of all three expeditions, he was Everest's veteran. None knew the mountain, or felt its compulsion, its fatal fascination, its power to stimulate men to supreme efforts, as he did. He knew from experience all the risks and difficulties involved in climbing Everest. But they did not deter him. The happy enthusiasm of 1921 had hardened into a stern, inflexible determination. There was no danger of his underestimating his adversary. "The chances of climbing Everest are fifty to one against," he had said, and he meant it. He had not keenly wanted to come on this expedition: he had a wife and child to care for, and a recent appointment to a mastership at Cambridge, which spelt greater prosperity and a wider field for the exercise of his talents, had made him reluctant to leave home. Besides, he was thirty-seven, and he probably felt that the climbing of Everest should be handed over to younger men. But now that his chance had come—perhaps his last chance—there was no question but that he would make the culminating effort of his life. Everything seemed auspicious; the weather had improved, he had a strong and enthusiastic companion, and the gas cylinders would undoubtedly facilitate the climbing. He was the man to grasp opportunity by the forelock. He had openly exulted in "the yet undimmed splendour, the undiminished glory, the unconquered supremacy of Mount Everest"; but did he mean it—mean it in his heart? That the mountain affected him deeply we know: its sublime loneliness, its vastness, its beauty and cruelty and mystery, struck deep at his active imagination. But he had never been worsted by a mountain before: why should he be worsted now? Compared with many of the Alpine peaks he knew, Everest, so far as mountaineering difficulties went, was, he said, "humbug." Everest

was an antagonist, a living challenge to the will of man ; he would grapple with her. He knew his powers, had faith in his dexterous hands, in the poise and trained lightness of his body. And in his heart he must have known that a mountain overcome was no less—was, in fact, even more—a mountain to be loved and respected. And the time was ripe. The camps were laid. Others had blazed the trail. They had been stopped short only by Everest's final defences. A little more effort, a little more luck with the weather, and then . . . It was for him to round off the work of the others, to carry the torch of achievement a trifle farther, beyond the couloir and up the last wall, to "string Everest's nose-tip," as someone put it.

On June 4th Mallory and Irvine ascended, with porters, to the North Col camp, and that evening Norton and Somervell returned from their magnificent climb to 28,000 feet. At half-past eight on the morning of the 6th Mallory and Irvine, after a meal of sardines and biscuits, set out with eight porters on their historic climb. Snow was falling when they reached Camp V, but there was little wind, and Mallory thought the prospects good. He sent back four porters to the Col, and with the remaining porters pushed on early next morning for the higher camp. Odell, whose rôle was that of a "support," now came up to occupy Camp V. Next day he was to move up to Camp VI, prepare food, and especially "hot" drink, against the return of the climbers, and descend again to Camp V. He was not, on any account, to loiter too long at Camp VI, for this camp numbered only one tent, barely large enough to accommodate two.

That night Odell, at a height of over 25,000 feet, slept alone. Before retiring he stood gazing for a while at the glories surrounding him, and as the sunset bathed the peaks in crimson and crocus dyes, so that they stood

up out of the shadows of the glacier like flaming spires, he drew in his breath with awe. Everything was miraculously pure, clear and unearthly : a world remote from all human preoccupations. Far away, a hundred miles and more, isolated and unchallenged, a princely crest caught the shafts of the sun : Kangchenjunga. Anon the lees of daylight drained away, the farther summits faded, and the snows nearer him were bathed in the silver of the Himalayan starlight. He sighed at the sheer wonder of it all, and then, shivering, re-entered the tent and carefully closed the flaps.

He was up with the daybreak, creeping out of his sleeping-bag stiff and torpid as a grub leaving its cocoon, but at heart tingling with anticipation. For this was the crucial day, the expedition's last raid upon the fortress that had withstood them for so long. The drama was under way, and he was part of it. He speculated as to whether the two climbers 2,000 feet above were up yet. They were likely to be, for Mallory was ever an early starter. However reluctant or sluggish he might feel—and like every climber he hated the early morning start, the unseasonable meal forced into the stomach, the bare bleak look of the mountain in the waning starlight—he was invariably the first to be ready for the job. Odell tried to imagine what they were feeling. Were they, like him, staring out at the weather and wondering what that bank of mist over the summit portended ? Were they feeling fit, and had Irvine thrown off that cough that had been troubling him ? Did they find the exertion of thawing and moulding their boots over the spirit stove, forcing them on to swollen feet, preparing and clearing away breakfast, as irksome as he, Odell, did ? Numb hands, stiff limbs, heart and lungs functioning strainedly : two whole precious hours taken up with domestic tasks !

But he was ready at last. Slinging a rucksack of pro-

visions over his shoulder, he set out up the rocky slope towards the ridge leading to Camp VI. No need for haste. He had ample time. Steady steps—no rushes, only fools did that ; steady breathing—in, out, in, out, in rhythm with the leg movements. Every now and again he stopped to chip off a piece of rock and scrutinize it : limestone and granite intermixed, rock as old as the world itself, rock which, in another form, had lain under the sea when wild sheep were grazing on Snowdon. Up he went, finding the going laborious, but glad that the wind was not strong. The higher reaches of the mountain were lost in rolling fog, which here and there glowed faintly as though there were sunshine higher up. No sign of Mallory and Irvine. But the morning was now well advanced ; they should be high above the mist, near the summit, by this time. He longed passionately to be with them, sharing the excitement of the advance, the heady anticipation of triumph. Lucky beggars !

And then comes a moment which he will never forget. When he is about half-way to Camp VI, the clouds part as abruptly as the curtains of a stage, and the North Face and the summit stand out crisp and brilliant in the sunlight. Fascinatedly he stares upward at the snowy ridge. On the ridge are two upthrusting "steps" of rock. Below the second of these steps appears a tiny black figure. A bird ? He stares intently. Blinks. The light on the snow has dazzled his eyes. He stares again. No, it is not a bird. The speck is moving along the snow. It is ascending the rock. A second figure joins it. Humans ! Mallory and Irvine ! He has an impulse to shout, but knows that is absurd : distances are deceptive in the transparent air of Everest, and the men must be nearly two miles away. Now the clouds are closing in again, the ridge, the summit, and those creeping figures are swallowed up.

It was well after noon. Mallory and Irvine were less than a thousand feet from their goal, and, from his brief glimpse of them, proceeding strongly. But to men burdened with gas cylinders, picking their way along rocks so steep and lacking in foothold, the ascent of a thousand feet meant at least four hours of hard trudge. Probably more. Mallory had reckoned to be at the top by midday, to allow adequate time to return to Camp VI before sunset: and even that would be eating into the safety-margin which is the religion of the mountaineer. Something—bad weather, sickness, or trouble with the oxygen perhaps—must have delayed their start. It was glaringly obvious that the summit would not, this time, be reached. Odell anxiously hoped that Mallory would retreat in time, as he had always vowed he would, however near the top might be. The monsoon was on its way, the weather might worsen, and an enforced night in the open would mean death. . . .

A shrewd wind, with flurries of sleet, was blowing when Odell, after some searching in the wilderness of rock, found Camp VI, and he was glad to take shelter for a time. He lay listening to the shrilling of the wind, wondering about his comrades. Had they reached their objective? Or turned back? Surely they must be on their way down by now. They might need help. The tent, placed as it was under a small cliff, might be difficult to locate in the blowing sleet. So he trudged along the mountain-side, butting his way through the wind, whistling and shouting in the hope that the returning climbers were within earshot. But his shouts seemed to be whirled away from his lips, and there was no answer but the derisive voice of the wind. He could do nothing. Staggering weakly, he returned to shelter. As he reached the tent the sun reappeared, and as if by magic the new-fallen snow evaporated. Everest stood bright and bare, but

of the assault party there was no sign. But there was no need to worry. The evening was early yet. It was too soon to expect their return. Emptying his rucksack of its provisions, and taking a hasty snack himself, Odell closed up the tent and commenced the return journey. He did not stop at Camp V, but hurried on to join Hazard at the Col. The snow-slope on the last lap proving attractively stiff and steep, he reached the Col by sliding on his feet, recovering for a few exhilarating moments one of the joys of schooldays. He gained the camp feeling little the worse for his two days of altitude climbing.

That evening he and Hazard attentively watched the upper slopes—which were clear of mist—but saw nothing of the climbers ; nor, when the moonlight came, was there visible a flare which would indicate that Mallory and Irvine were in distress. Assuming that the two must have regained Camp VI, they turned in.

Next morning their scrutiny through field glasses revealed no sign of activity at Camp VI, and the watchers began to grow uneasy. The hours crept on to midday. Still no sign. Curious. Mallory and Irvine should have started out for Camp V before this. Something must have gone wrong. Odell, with two porters, set out in search. In a racing gale they reached Camp V. The cold sharpened, and after the angry flames of sunset had subsided Odell, wrapped in two sleeping-bags, with all his clothes on, settled down to a sleepless and miserable night.

Why, he asked himself, had Mallory and Irvine not made their way down to this camp ? Was the weather even worse high up—so bad, in fact, as to prevent their descending ? Knowing Mallory's tremendous endurance, he could hardly believe it. Were they, then, lying up there too exhausted to set out ? Or lame in the feet ?

Or stricken with mountain sickness? Or injured in some way? Or could it be that . . . ? He dared not frame the thought in words, but all night it gnawed at his mind and, intolerably cold as he was, he longed for the dawn so that he could go up to Camp VI and either confirm or confute his fears.

Dawn found the porters incapable of proceeding farther. Cold, sleeplessness and hunger (for they had gone to rest too weary to eat) had knocked the life out of them. So he escorted them part of the way towards Camp IV—the man's capacity for work was astounding—and set out for the highest camp alone. Progress was hard, the wind drove athwart the ridge and at times the struggle to maintain his balance was so taxing that he was obliged to take shelter behind rocks and, panting like a marathon runner, recover sufficient energy and will-power to resume. Though he was carrying oxygen, he found himself deriving so little benefit from it that after a time he switched it off.

Camp VI looked inexpressibly forsaken. The flaps were closed, and—a clear sign that there was no occupancy—the tent was partially collapsed. His stomach turned sick with foreboding. He called out. Silence. With trembling fingers he opened a flap. Even now he half expected to find the climbers within: done-up and frostbitten perhaps, but alive. But there was no one there. The provisions, spare clothing, sleeping-bags and oxygen parts, lying exactly as he had left them two days ago, told their own story. Mallory and Irvine had not returned. They were still out there somewhere on the mountain. Dead. Dead—those laughing companions. Dead—the two gallant fighters he had seen urging their way towards the summit. Dead. He would never see them again. It seemed impossible. Unreal. Dream-like. He slumped down, his aching body and labouring

lungs forgotten, his spirit overcome with hopelessness. Outside, Everest howled her challenge: that challenge which Mallory and Irvine had heard and answered, had given their lives to meet.

He pulled himself together. No use giving way, he told himself. One must do something. Something, however little. It might at least be possible to find their bodies. Perhaps by some miracle he might find them alive. Wrenching the oxygen apparatus from his shoulders, he left the tent and with savage resolution commenced to climb the face of the mountain towards the ridge. Never had Everest, the incarnation of all that is fell and aloof, looked so hostile. The gale twitched up the snow in sheets and streamers hundreds of feet high, struck the precipices with echoing thunder-claps. The Goddess Mother was in her blackest mood. *Go back*, she seemed to say, *Go back, presumptuous human, lest you be slain as your comrades were slain. You are frail; I am mighty. Back!* He set his teeth and pressed on. Half an hour passed. An hour. He lost count of time. Nothing mattered now but the finding of his friends. Mallory, the brilliant, the witty, the brave and understanding friend, the perfect climber. Irvine, the young giant, great of heart, smiling, ready for any adventure. His friends!

He climbed for two hours, searching the rocks for a sign of the lost climbers. But the mountain yielded no clue, and crawling like a fly among that chaos of stone and snow ate the heart out of him. He stopped. Common-sense said he was acting the fool. He would never find them. A search party of one had not a chance in a million of finding them. He turned his back on the summit. Dully he thought, two things remained to be done: to retrieve from the tent such articles as were worth taking away, either for their intrinsic value

or as souvenirs, and to signal his tragic news to Hazard.

At Camp III, below the ice-cliff, Noel was staring through a telescope. On the edge of the shelf on which the Col camp was set he saw Hazard's figure. He was placing sleeping-bags on the snow. Six sleeping-bags arranged in the form of a cross. Noel saw them distinctly: a cross. His heart sank. It was one of a number of prearranged signals. It meant:

“Disaster.”

“Odell has signalled,” he said to Bruce, who was standing beside him.

“What does he say?” muttered Bruce.

“He says——” Noel looked into Bruce’s drawn face and faltered. He could not get the ghastly word out. He handed the glass to Bruce. “Look for yourself.”

Bruce looked. He lowered the glass in silence.

“It looks like——”

“I’m afraid so.”

“A cross?”

“Yes.”

They tried desperately to persuade themselves and each other that it was not so. But it was hopeless. They stood gazing unseeingly at the mountain: no less stricken because earlier messages from Hazard had led them to expect something like this. Then they carried the news to Norton. Norton looked stunned. They could guess what was in his mind. It was not only grief for the loss of his friends. It was self-reproach. He was the leader, these men had been in his care, he could have stopped them from going. He had let them go. The responsibility for their deaths was, he was telling himself, his.

“It was nobody’s fault,” Noel said.

Norton collected himself with an effort.

"Get the sleeping-bags out," he said. "We must signal Hazard."

"A search party?"

"No. It would be useless. After two days. . . . Hazard must come down."

He watched the mist rolling over the face of Everest, repelled, fascinated, pondering what her secret was, wondering what fate had overtaken Mallory and Irvine, as it might have overtaken himself. Then he walked slowly to his tent, thinking of the fateful message that had to be hurried to the Base Camp, to Phari, and thence to England.

So Mallory and his companion passed out of human ken, and their fate is the permanent enigma of Everest. By a bitter irony, while Mallory was making his historic assault, a letter in his hand was on its way to England. In it there are these saddening words :

"Whether we get up or not, it will be my job to get the party off the mountain in safety—and I'm keen about that part too—no one climber or porter is going to get killed if I can help it—that would spoil all."

It is unlikely, after the lapse of years, that we shall ever know what happened to them. Up to a point we can follow them in imagination : see them turning out in the morning, crawling reluctantly out of their cocoon warmth, thawing boots over a flame, drinking lukewarm tea, trudging off stiff and grudgingly, stamping circulation back into the limbs and courage into the heart—up and up along the snow-belt on to the ridge, out of the world of comfort and security, to beat once more—how vainly, how bravely!—at the last fortress door of Everest. Everest is fighting them, harassing them with swords of wind and flails of driving snow. Spindrift thrashes

into their faces. Behind their feet are billowing clouds, and below the clouds is the world which they have renounced. Renounced for what? Futile question! Swaying under the weight of the cylinders, they push on with dogged persistence. They are tired and hungry—the flapping of the tent fabric, loud as machine-gun fire, kept them awake most of the night, and morning found the tinned foods set hard. Rests are frequent. But they go on. Their wills have the mastery of their bodies. *Onward*, says a voice within them. *Onward!* And then—

How did fate strike them? Was it swift or gradual, expected or unexpected? The sudden annihilating fall, or a numb sinking into unconsciousness beneath the indifferent stars? Everest will not tell us. She slew them, the mature man and the eager boy, and the manner of her slaying is her own secret.

There are theories. Some—among them Norton—think their death was due to an ordinary mountaineering accident, a slip and a fall, perhaps from the rock step where Odell last saw them. (The finding of Mallory's ice axe by the 1933 expedition, some distance below the step, may be confirmation of this theory.) But others—including Odell—are of the opinion that they achieved the summit and were benighted on the way down. It is possible. Determined as Mallory was to retreat, even from a stone's-throw of the summit, when the time-limit was reached, it is easy to imagine that, once on that final pyramid, in the exultation of nearing his objective he decided to take a sporting chance. One can picture him gazing upward, towards the ice-streamer, noting that the climbing offers no insuperable obstacles, and thinking what fun it would be to cut down that margin of safety for a last dash at the summit. Getting back will mean a race against the clock, will mean taking risks.

But what prize ever fell to the man afraid of risks ? Besides, he has confidence in his endurance, his ability to struggle through somehow. And Irvineæ is going well. But he must remember that, as the older and more experienced climber, he is answerable for the lad's safety as well as his own. His watch tells him that the afternoon is half gone. By Gad, they've cut it fine already.

His eyes meet Irvine's.

" How do you feel ? " he asks.

The youngster grins breathlessly. " Grand."

" We ought to get back now."

" Get back my foot ! We are nearly there."

Mallory wants to say, " No. I'm the leader and I won't let you risk your life." But he checks the words. They would sound—priggish. And the excitement in Irvine's shining eyes : how can he bring himself to quench that ?

" Right ! " he says. " Come on ! "

And they commence the climb out of the couloir, on to the rock face, pulling up slowly, with many rests, up above the clouds, higher than man has ever been before, higher than even the vulture flies, with the sunlit summit luring them on : to achieve a triumph that was never to be communicated to their comrades . . .

So runs speculation. It may be that they never even reached the couloir. But somewhere in the citadel of Everest—on the mountain itself or in the jaws of one of her glaciers—lie their battered bodies, embalmed in snow. To future generations their names will stand for the pathos and grandeur of lives given for an ideal. Theirs is renown for all time.

So once again man had hurled against the bastions of Everest the concentrated force of his resolution, his patience, his courage, and his cunning : had borne her

angers with a valiant heart, fought with her to the limit of his powers, and magnificently failed.

But he was not always doomed to fail. The reward would one day be his.

The attack must go on.

CHAPTER V

THE ATTACK MAINTAINED

NINE years elapsed before permission was again obtained for the crossing of Tibet. The death of Mallory and Irvine, following upon the tragedy of 1922, convinced the Delai Lama that the gods were angered by the foreigners' violation of their citadel, and that any further expeditions would bring punishment upon themselves and upon his own race. Setting aside the impiety of it, the assault of the mountain seemed to him purposeless. General Bruce, when asked by one of the Lamas why Englishmen wished to climb Everest, replied with considerable adroitness that Everest represented to them a kind of pilgrimage: the attainment of the summit would bring a spiritual fulfilment. The Delai Lama was no longer to be put off with such sophistries. But after nine years of diplomatic skirmishing he was induced to change his mind. Permits were at length coaxed from him, and in May 1933 English adventurers, led by Hugh Ruttledge, again approached the mountain.

Those nine years had rendered most of the members of the 1924 contingent too old to grapple with adversaries like Everest; Odell was prevented by domestic ties; and Somervell had dedicated his knowledge to medical missionary work in India. But the climbing world was full of capable youngsters agog with the ambition to go to Everest, and the principal difficulty of the selection committee was caused by the embarrassing abundance of volunteers. Out of the ruck, however, stood several climbers whose record clearly marked them out as suitable for Everest. Choice fell inevitably upon the party who had conquered Kamet in 1931. A Himalayan peak

in the United Provinces of India, Kamet (25,447 feet) was, until the ascent of Nanda Devi in 1936, the highest summit yet achieved by man. Frank Smythe, Eric Shipton and Capt. E. St. J. Birnie were its conquerors: bold, shrewd and practised climbers, versed in Himalayan conditions, and of proved powers of acclimatization. L. R. Wager, fresh from his second Greenland expedition, J. L. Longland and Wyn Harris were other recruits. These were to be the climbing nucleus, the spearhead of the attack.

They were more elaborately prepared than any previous party. Their oxygen apparatus was a vastly less fickle affair than the somewhat provisional type used in 1924. The tents were of an improved pattern. For the lower camps there were double-skinned yet light tents, with sewn-in ground-sheets and mica windows, accommodating six men, and more if necessary. The high-altitude tents were made of aero-wing canvas, sturdy enough to resist any gale, but weighing only about a stone. Improved goggles to exclude snow, windproof helmets and coats, gloves guaranteed to keep the hands warm for step-cutting: such things bordered upon luxury.

Wireless receiving and transmitting sets were taken to allow the Base Camp to receive regular weather forecasts from Darjeeling; also a field telephone for use between Camp III and the North Col. And one sanguine inventor made an offer, politely declined, to lay a system of piping to convey supplies of oxygen to the highest camps!

Camp III was established on the old site near the foot of the ice-cliff, and then the weather broke. Wireless messages told that the monsoon had already reached the Bay of Bengal, and small grey-bellied clouds floating from the south-east, swirling upward as they encountered the western wind currents of Everest, told an ominous

tale. The task of making a route up the cliff to the Col took a full week: parties setting out at dawn to cut steps would labour for hours and then have the mortification of seeing all their work discounted by the all-effacing snow.

But the work was persisted with, and after some arduous gymnastics on the final slope by Smythe and Shipton, the porters were able to carry up the tents and stores for Camp IV, which was built on the lip of a crevasse below the Col itself.

It was a site to satisfy the greediest lover of sensation. Two steps forward from a tent would pitch the unwary down the ice-cliff; and it was fervently hoped that there were no sleep-walkers among the company!

Far below, in the Rongbuk manastery, the holy men rotated their prayer wheels and intoned prayers for the climbers—mysterious crimson-robed figures, entreating the gods to grant fair weather and withhold their wrath. But the gods were stern, their citadel was in danger, and upon these impious outlanders they emptied the vials of their wrath. No sooner had Harris and Wager established Camp V—at 25,700 feet, higher than the Camp V of 1924—than a scouring gale got up, and for a whole day they could do nothing but lie and talk, listen to the dirges of the wind, and beshrew the weather and their own idleness. From below the mountain looked clear and tranquil, and Smythe and Shipton came up to occupy Camp V as support party. So there were now four candidates for a tent which barely held two. The original occupants went back to the Col, while Smythe and Shipton took possession.

Dawn failed to bring the customary slackening of the gale. Indeed it worsened, and the mountain was engulfed in driving mist and snow. A withdrawal to Camp IV in such weather was not to be thought of. The danger

of being cut off was acute. The storm did not blow itself out until the following midday, when they promptly scuttled down to more comfortable quarters.

It was galling. Ruttledge, with the vicissitudes of previous expeditions to guide him, had planned an early attack to allow his men ample time for acclimatization while the weather held. But the monsoon—bugbear of every Himalayan enterprise—had also elected to be early. All the climbers were fatigued, and of the porters there was not one who was not frostbitten. That was perhaps natural, for carriers of loads must occasionally take off a glove to open a bale or undo a knot—nothing is more tiresome than doing such jobs in gloves—and on Everest frostbite is the automatic punishment for exposure of the fingers.

The gale was getting up again, and it looked as though progress was finally nipped in the bud. But what they had fought and planned for was not to be lightly surrendered. The ailing porters were helped down the ice-cliff, but the rest set their teeth and decided to hang on at Camp IV until Everest pushed them off. This appeared literally likely: avalanches commenced to bombard the tents, and the only way to avoid being flung down the cliff was to carry the camp on to the Col itself. The new position was shockingly exposed. The tents were perched on a saddle of wind-thrashed snow, overlooking a 4,000-feet drop to the main Rongbuk Glacier, and without an iota of protection against the relentless beating of the north-west hurricane. The wind stung the eyes in spite of their encasing goggles, and only the protective covering of grease prevented the skin being flayed off their faces. Comfort was a thing of the past. The contrast of relative conditions was such that the little amenities of the Base Camp, and even of Camp III, now seemed to belong to some dissolute other-world.

On the morning of the 28th May an interval of comparative calm allowed the reoccupation of Camp V, which was reached in five hours, the laden porters putting up a doughty performance. The critical question now was : Could even these hardy fellows carry tents and baggage to 27,000 feet ? Upon their success in this hung the chances of the expedition, for only from a camp at that altitude could the assault party even remotely expect to succeed. Fortunately the men rose to the occasion. All were up and astir at 5 a.m. Now for a snack and hot drinks, and then away. But the tinned foods had turned to solid lumps. (The only way to keep tinned stuffs moist on Everest is to hug them overnight in the sleeping-bags.) The thermos flasks, so carefully filled the night before, had gone cold, and fresh tea, tepid unstimulating stuff, had to be brewed before a start could be made. It was the old story—delay and again delay, whittling down the already inadequate climbing time, reducing the chances of success. It was not until three hours had been given to such domestic matters that a start could be made.

First along the ridge itself, and then leaving it to traverse diagonally in a short cut towards the first of the two rock steps where Mallory was last seen. Nasty ground now, precipitous slabs, of a boiler-plate smoothness, where each man had to rely on balance and the grip of his boot nails : not quite steep enough to hold on by the hand, and in any case there were no handholds. But the porters moved with the poise and security of true mountaineers. Upwards and onwards, the mountains about them shrinking to mere molehills, the precipice below them becoming ever steeper : a snail's pace, slow but steady, a hundred yards an hour : splendid !

At 27,400 feet a small ledge was found under the ridge, a disconcertingly tilted shelf of rock, snow-clogged and

only three feet wide : and here, as no more suitable site offered itself, the snow and scree were scraped away and a tent anchored. It was 1.30 p.m. The porters were still in good fettle, despite the fact that they had carried loads higher than loads had ever been carried before—six hundred feet higher than the Camp VI of 1924. Indeed they would have gone forward to reconnoitre for a better camping-place had not Harris and Wager emphatically declined to allow such a thing.

Though escorted by Longland—it was a humane rule of this expedition that in no circumstances were porters to be allowed to descend without an escort—the gallant fellows had a rough time of it on the way down. No sooner were they off the slabs on to the comparatively easy foothold of the ridge than Everest once again unmasked her batteries. One moment the air was placid. The next, devilry was afoot. Tempest swept over the mountain face, dashed them off their balance, tossed blinding sheets of snow into their faces. Goggles icing over, it became difficult to see ; as soon as they took them off, the flying snow crystals froze their eyelashes together. Visibility shrunk to a few yards. Longland, groping the way over a ridge he had never been on before this day, realized how grave was the risk of going astray and falling over a precipice. Frequently the men lost touch with each other and had to be rounded up : a protracted business when they could scarcely make their voices heard. Somehow—by will-control as much as strength—they kept moving. To stand or sit down would probably have meant freezing to death. Passing the collapsed tent of the 1924 Camp VI—touching relic of Mallory and Irvine's last night alive—they descended over icy scree and snow-covered cliffs, exposed to the full fury of the tempest, and at last, through the snow-whirl, they discerned a vague green shape. A tent ! It was Camp V. They were

safe. Longland was almost as knocked up as his charges, but Smythe and Shipton had hot drinks ready, and he quickly recovered his strength. Longland then led his porters down to the Col, thus completing a most notable feat of mountaineering.

Meanwhile, at Camp VI, Harris and Wager, after forcing a meal of chicken essence and tinned fruit into their reluctant stomachs—high altitude producing the usual thirst and lack of appetite—wriggled into their sleeping-bags. It was an eerie sensation, to curl up for the night at 27,400 feet, higher than man, or for that matter any living thing, had ever slept before—less than two thousand feet below the highest point of the whole world, with nothing between them and the angers of the storm but a pitiful hutch of fabric. And theirs was scant comfort. On the sloping floor they could not keep from rolling on to one another, and the consequent disturbances and ill-humours made sleep impossible except in short spells.

Before six o'clock, in the chilly greyness that precedes daybreak, they were on the slabs, making for the North-East Ridge. Wager's feet went stone-cold and he had to take off his boots—it was a panting effort to get them off—and rub snow against the skin to prevent frostbite. Soon afterwards Harris, who was in the lead, found the ice axe which was afterwards identified as Mallory's. It was lying on a steep slab, clear of snow, its steel head looking remarkably new. Not wishing to be further encumbered, they left the axe to be recovered on their return, as it subsequently was.

Their plan had been to make for the first step and so on to the ridge. This was the route Mallory had favoured, while Norton and Somervell had preferred the way across the face of the mountain. But when they neared the first step they saw that it was going to make difficult

climbing, so they moved along the mountain face a little below, and roughly parallel with, the ridge. They did not rope up, for there were no belays—projections around which the rope can be fastened in dangerous places where the climbers must move one at a time. Also there was no secure foothold on which they could brace themselves to meet the violent pull on the rope in the event of a fall. Roped, a slip by one would have dragged both down.

They did make an effort to ascend the second step, but the rock was sheer, and such holds as it presented were veneered with new ice. A shallow gully cutting across the step, which had looked promising from below, turned out to be quite impassable.

At length they arrived at the couloir, which hacks through the mountain face in an almost vertical drop of 10,000 feet to the main Rongbuk Glacier. Here they roped. The crossing of the couloir was a stiff test of nerve and skill, for it was choked with snow which cascaded on the slightest provocation. The couloir crossed, they proceeded gingerly upward, until a narrow cleft full of snow barred their way. Wager balanced on a small slab and paid out the rope to Harris. It was a situation fraught with peril, for there was no belay on the slab, and as soon as Harris had taken two or three steps he knew that the snow, in its present lack of consistency, simply could not be trusted to support him. He *might* have got across, but there was no sense in unnecessarily courting danger.

What was to be done? It was 12.30 and the thousand feet that remained between them and the summit would take at least four hours. That would not be allowing much time for the return to Camp V before sundown. (There could be no possibility of staying at Camp VI, for Smythe and Shipton would be in occupation for their attempt of the following day, and the tent barely held

two.) And both were already very tired. Neither man thought he could climb much farther: the nervous strain and concentration of climbing where a false step—to which a tired man is more than usually liable—would bring about a helpless slide down the mountain, were very taxing. There was only one course open to them: to retrace their steps. There is no arguing with a mountain of the severity of Everest.

After giving an account of their day to the occupants of Camp VI, they returned to Camp V, where they stayed the night. Next morning, on the way down to the North Col, Harris had a narrow escape. On a short, hump-backed snow-slope he attempted the time-saving device of a sitting glissade. *Whiz!* With startlingly increasing momentum he found himself shooting, not towards the Col, but in an oblique direction towards the precipice which overhangs the East Rongbuk Glacier. In a split second he had turned over on his face, grasped the ice-axe head, his chest pressed hard against the haft, and slowly—because an abrupt movement might have dragged the axe out of his hands—twisted the pick in the frozen snow. It gripped with a rasp that set his teeth on edge. He watched it tearing a deepening groove. With a curious fatalistic detachment he saw a feather of snow spin up out of the groove and gently float away. It seemed long minutes, though it was only a matter of seconds, before the speed of his descent began to slacken. The pull upon his arms, held tightly against his chest as they were, was excruciating. At length the braking action of the pick brought him to a standstill. He cautiously twisted his head and looked round. With a shock he saw that his feet were dangling over the edge of the precipice. That instinct, flashing from brain to body like an electric current, which is bred in mountain climbing, that perfection of technique which enables a man to

do the one precisely apposite thing in a crisis, had saved him from a terrible end. As he crawled up to rejoin his companion his hands were trembling and he felt near to collapse.

On the same day—the 31st of May—Smythe and Shipton were confined to Camp VI by a blizzard, whose savagery was such that both uneasily wondered whether the monsoon had broken, in which case descent to the lower camps might be prevented. They had only sufficient food and fuel for two days. The lack of oxygen in the air produced the usual high-altitude effects, making them morose and touchy. Shipton, who had perversely contracted an appetite, inveighed against the monotony of the commissariat.

“Jellies and slops!” he said bitterly. “Nothing but jellies and slops all day long!”

But the 1st of June, though boisterously windy, was clear of cloud. They struggled into their clothing—Shetland vest, thick flannel shirt, camel-hair sweater, six light pullovers, and a silk-lined outer suit known, for the sake of economy, as windproof—and, going steadily and confidently, were soon close to the crest of the ridge, over which they could see the monsoon clouds massing to the south-east and trailing a smoky haze of rain over the foothills. But they had not gone far when Shipton succumbed to stomach trouble. Rather than retard his companion he decided to return to camp before his condition worsened. Smythe went on, though he knew full well that, so far as reaching the summit was concerned, he might as well have turned back. No man will ever conquer Everest without the comfort and support of a companion.

He chose a route somewhat higher than that of Wager and Harris—mistakenly, as he quickly discovered. One

snow-slope, ninety feet across, required step-cutting, and several times, when the ledges were too sheer, he had to turn in his tracks and seek an alternative route. More step-cutting took him across the couloir, whose snow had hardened since Wager and Harris traversed it. Now he commenced to climb the buttress on the farther side. Sheltered from the west wind, the snow on the buttress lay loose as castor sugar ; he had to shovel it away with his hands to find holds. In that tenuous air the work was cruelly exacting. The rock was rotten as the shell of an old tooth—all mountains are more or less in the process of decomposition. Once a knob on which he stood to take a breather broke clean off ; had not his axe been wedged in a crack at the time it would have been the end of him. An hour's climbing took him only fifty feet. There was none of the joy of Alpine climbing in it ; it was hard, relentless effort that took all his stamina. He gave up. Dully, too spent even to feel the bitterness of defeat, overcome with the feeling of his own futility and littleness, he began the climb down the couloir.

Norton, Wager and Harris had turned back at about the same point. The buttress is the last of Everest's bulwarks, yet time after time men who have toiled almost to the limit of endurance have been thwarted with the summit a mere stone's-throw above. *So far, says Everest, but no farther. You have had your little triumph. Now taste of failure.* And they turn in honourable defeat. . . .

One thing is certain. No expedition has yet pitched its final camp high enough to allow time to reach the top and return in safety. Each advance climber has already had his strength taxed before making that decisive effort. Everest will never be mastered until an additional camp is pitched at the foot of these final rocks. This will involve titanic feats of load-carrying, especially as this camp will require to be victualled for several days against

the event of bad weather marooning the climbers. (We shall see in Chapter VIII what retribution dogged the Nanga Parbat climbers when this precaution was neglected.) A tent of the stoutest design will have to be brought up, bedding of the maximum warmth, generous reserves of oxygen : only thus will the last portion of the climb be essayed by men in full health and strength. A formidable task. But unless Everest is to be given up as a bad job it must be done. It *will* be done. It is war now ; it seems as though the mountain were deliberately tightening up her resistance ; nothing must be left to chance. It is human life that is in the scales. Never again must an exhausted man be allowed to descend in storm or blizzard, as Longland did and as Smythe was yet to do. There has been too much loss of life already.

On the traverse back to Camp VI, Smythe, who, though he has the fine perceptions of a poet, is nevertheless a man of the utmost clarity of mind, experienced a peculiar sensation. He felt that he was accompanied by a second person—felt, indeed, that this other person was attached to him by a rope. The presence was, he felt, comradely and curiously sustaining : should Smythe have a mishap the other would save him.

Ridiculous, he told himself. He was the victim of hallucination, a breakdown of the logical faculty, common enough to men climbing at high altitudes, where physical and moral disintegration sets in. Even Alpine climbers have experienced such things. The holy men immersed in spiritual matters in the monastery below would have said that divine succour was with him ; but his sceptical western mind would have scouted such an explanation. And yet——! So convincing was this chimera that once when he stopped to take a snack he turned, without thinking, to offer his “companion” a piece of chocolate. A shock ! No one there. Not until he drew near to the

camp did the presence leave him. And then, though this "home-coming" meant rest, company and safety, he felt desolately lonely.

Upon Smythe's return, Shipton, who felt much better for his rest, set out for Camp V, and Smythe slept alone. He awakened to find the tent nearly full of snow, driven in through a hole in the canvas burnt by the spirit cooker. The morning was serene. The monsoon clouds below lay in an enchanted stillness. Progression along the rock slabs called for extreme care, for the rocks were glazed with ice. But the stillness was deceptive. He had halted to get his breath when suddenly he saw a huge blurry cloud marching towards him. Before he knew what was happening an onslaught of wind caught him as in a Vulcan grip, and only the fact that the haft of his ice axe was engaged in a cleft saved him from being flung down. Haste was needed now. Never in his climbing career had it been so necessary to him. But he dared not hasten. Every step he made had to be sure, accurate, balanced. The wind thundered like gunfire against the cliffs, and in that demonic barrage he commenced to grope his way off the rocks. His nails gripped on the iced slabs. If he should slip now—!

Presently he was on the snow again. Fighting with every atom of his stubbornness—now stumbling, now advancing on hands and knees, now lying flat on his face—he crept slowly, yard by yard, downward. Not in the Alps, not on Kamet, nor yet on Everest itself, had he encountered such a hurricane. It seemed as though infernos were let loose about him. It was a conflict between him and the evil nemesis of Everest: between his will to survive and the mountain's will to exterminate him. Thank God for one small mercy: he knew his way. Only that saved him.

At last, with inexpressible relief, he saw, some 300 feet

beneath him, the gaily coloured tents of Camp V. Two figures emerged from one of the tents and started down. He shouted. To his chagrin they did not turn round. He was cold and spent, tottery at the knees, and to reach the camp he had to cut several steps, hanging one-handed in that devilish wind. When he reached the camp he had the further disappointment of finding that the tents had been collapsed, so there was nothing for it but to push on to the North Col, which he ultimately reached in safety.

Thus ended the third attack on Everest. The mountain was still the master. But they had all given of their best, and that is the most that even mountain climbers can give.

“ ‘Tis not in mortals to command success,
But we’ll do more, deserve it.”

That might have been the motto of every Everest campaign.

The small tackling the great : David confronting the giant with his preposterous sling and pebbles ; the twice-beaten Robert Bruce risking all on a last fling with his destiny ; the Light Brigade hurling its paltry force against the belching guns ; men, armed with nothing but the will to win, beating their way through the defences of a great mountain : the story changes but the spirit is undying. In 1936, Ruttledge came to do battle again. Along the glacier, up the ice-wall, camp-laying, load-bearing, striving and suffering : the details are familiar, in imagination we go with them, sharing their setbacks and such meagre rewards as their grit and devotion secured. But this time the scales were hopelessly weighted. The storms came early, the mountain was plastered with snow and raging with wind, the summit was as unattainable as the moon. It was struggle and

repulse all the way : staunch-hearted, desperate, without hope, but with an unshakable determination not to abandon the fight until life was in jeopardy. There was no loss of life, thought at least once there might have been. Snatching the chance of a brief clearing of the weather, Harris and Shipton, roped, were ascending from the Col in a desperate attempt to reoccupy a higher camp. The slopes were crusted with ice, formed by the rapid freezing of the snow. Five hundred feet up, and then, as they cut diagonally across the slope, the entire face of the slope disrupted as if under the blow of a colossal hammer. In a moment they were in the midst of a mêlée of cracking, sliding, crushing and rumbling ice masses. No time to think ! Shipton was being swept away towards a precipice edge. Harris, leaping from his collapsing foothold, caught sight of a strip of unbroken ice. A chance ! Hurling himself face downwards, he dug his axe as deep as it would go, and twisted the rope round it. Lying upon the axe, the rope grasped in his hands, he braced himself in readiness. A shock that almost wrenched him from his hold : Shipton had fallen to the limit of the rope. But the axe held, and presently, while the avalanche volleyed and reverberated down the cliffs beneath, Shipton drew himself up to rejoin his comrade. They were safe.

The expedition was defeated. But there was no tragedy in their defeat, for the battle has but begun and man will suffer many reverses before the final triumph is his. The very mightiness of the prize makes that inevitable. It was only after repeated attempts, spread over five years, that the redoubtable Whymper scaled the Matterhorn : and in the Himalaya the altitude of the Matterhorn is merely the position for a Base Camp. To go beyond 23,000 feet is to pass the limits of life, and the higher men go the fiercer waxes the contest.

But man has already reached the summit in aeroplanes, and what he has done with wings he will do on his own legs. Beaten back, he will come again. Already he is preparing a fresh assault. And with each reverse man's respect for the mountain deepens, and his knowledge of his own capacities increases. His courage is like a Siegfried's sword, sustaining him until the end. Everest is no longer merely a mountain : it has become a symbol of the highest strivings of the human spirit. It represents a quest, a Holy Grail of which men scarcely realize the meaning. Because it has brought the best out of Englishmen, summoned them from their far-off homes to great exploits, and claimed English lives, Everest, though territorially a part of Nepal, is spiritually within our Empire, a

“ corner of some foreign field
That is for ever England.”

Other European climbing bodies realize this and chivalrously waive their claims.

What has been done is not wasted. Upon its solid foundation will be reared the structure of future success. The inspiration of the pioneers lives. Kellas, Irvine, Mallory, Somervell, Shipton, Smythe and the rest have pointed the way. There will be no shortage of men to hand on the torch.

P A R T T W O

CHAPTER VI

CIRCLING THE SUMMIT

APRIL 3rd, 1933.

In the terraced rice-fields girdling a valley slope in Nepal a dark-skinned man goes about his work. The valley is deep and secluded, nameless, remote from civilization, receiving no news of the world but what comes on the mouths of occasional couriers. But it is his home, his livelihood, it holds the measure of his life and thought. Beyond, to the north, diamond-bright above the ever-present dust haze, stand the mountains within whose Buddha-lap he has spent all the hours of his days, as did his forefathers whose souls are now gathered to the summits. Lordly and lofty in their pose and height, as befits the temples of the Holy Ones, they drive down their angers upon him, scourge his produce and flocks, yet unquestioningly he worships them.

Presently he looks up, perplexed. A sound like the million-times-magnified humming of a mosquito ! Two small objects, the light glinting on their wings, flying towards him from the direction of the mountains. He stands stock-still, gazing up with incredulous eyes. Their like he has never seen before. They are descending now, their glinting pinions motionless ; they pass over his head with deepening throb. Soon the hazes to the southward swallow them up, and he sees them no more, though his gaze still follows them.

Birds ? But birds that hum, birds with rigid wings ! His mind, lost in the ancient darkness of dread and superstition, gropes in vain for an answer. How can he know

that, at long last, man, riding a contraption of wood and steel and canvas transported piecemeal from England, has achieved the dream of Jules Verne and other imaginative persons : has looked *down* upon the World's highest mountain, danced in her storm winds and passed through her six-mile meteor-plume of ice, and returned unscathed ? Man's militia having failed, he has taken unto himself wings and penetrated where vulture and eagle cannot go.

When, on December 17th, 1903, Wilbur Wright coaxed a sketchy box-kite of a machine into the air and flew for fifty-nine seconds, he can have had no conception of the era of human achievement inaugurated in that breathless minute. But the rapid development of flying is one of the most remarkable phenomena of modern times. Once man had learned to move in this new dimension there was no holding him back. In 1909 the world rang with the astounding news of Bleriot's flight across the English Channel, and quick on the heels of that exploit came the first flight from London to Manchester. 1919 saw the crossing of the Atlantic Ocean in a tinkered-up bombing plane by Alcock and Brown ; Byrd crossed the North Pole in 1926. In the sunshine of such successes aeronautical science throve like Jack's Beanstalk. It was uncanny. It was bewildering. It was unparalleled in human history. Triumph followed triumph, records were set up only to be knocked to pieces within a week or a month. There were flights from England to Australia, over ocean and forest and barren desert : planes which fell apart on landing were patched together again and flogged onward with coughing engines, to limp home to their objective with pilot and observer half dead with nervous strain. A one-eyed American pioneered a route round the world, and others were quickly in his wake. Machines caught fire or fell to bits in the air ; crashed

because of engine trouble ; crashed because of fog ; crashed because of bad flying, or structural defects, or jammed controls ; or crashed—simply. But the flights went on. There was no stopping them. Many of them were “stunts,” feats of crazy courage which came off ; but much was learnt from them about structure, engines, weather conditions. Then chains of aerodromes were laid down, fragments of civilization in remote and desolate places, hives of activity which the camel and the buffalo stared at in amazement. While young men were sky-larking in the air, wiser heads were busy in machine room and laboratory ; aircraft became increasingly powerful, comfortable and safe. Winged liners annihilated distance with their roaring airscrews ; aerial postal services became a reality.

By 1930 pilots, using oxygen, were forcing their planes to altitudes hitherto undreamt of, out of the world’s belt of atmosphere into air so thin that the whirling airscrew could scarcely “bite.” Lieutenant Soucek of the United States Army Corps ascended to 43,166 feet, or nearly $8\frac{1}{2}$ miles ; and this record was shortly eclipsed by a British airman, Captain C. F. Unwins. Balloons had gone much higher : in 1932 Professor Picard soared to the staggering altitude of 54,450 feet, into the stratosphere, the outer solitudes of space, tempest-ridden and poisonous with nitrogen. It was natural, then, that the aspirations of flying men should centre upon the project of an Everest flight. Such a project was, of course, highly perilous. It is one thing to fly to a great altitude over flat country ; but it is a vastly different proposition to fly over the Himalaya. Flyers over the Alps, and pilots of cross-American air services, had learnt from bitter experience the peculiar pitfalls of mountain flying. High mountains —the Himalaya, of course, to a greater degree than others —breed their own weathers, and are veritable death-traps

for airmen. The sun beating upon the rock-face sends a rush of hot air up the cliff, forming a vacuum. Into this vacuum surges a fresh supply of air, which in turn heats and presses upward. Thus there is formed a continuous vertical current of ever-increasing velocity, which sweeps over the ridge and down the farther side in violent wind-storms : so that the air is as full of gulf s and gorges as the mountain itself.

The Himalayan flyer is at the mercy of his engine, for a landing in that world of ice and rock is hopeless. A flight over Everest would be either an unqualified success or an unqualified failure. Everest would allow no half-measures.

But on the morning of April 3rd, 1933, the pilots and observers who are to attempt this feat feel no fear, only a mounting excitement. They have been at their aerodrome at Purnea (Nepal) for many days awaiting a favourable meteorological report. At last it has come : the wind blowing over Everest has dropped below the sixty miles an hour velocity, and their Moth scouting plane has returned from a survey flight with the information that the mountain is almost free of cloud. Capital ! The two Westland machines—biplanes, electrically heated, and equipped with air-cooled radial engines—are ticking over in readiness, their wings trembling slightly as if in eagerness to leave the ground. The long-awaited moment has arrived.

The four flyers—two pilots and two photographic observers—don their electrically heated suits—twenty-five minutes is the minimum time for this clumsy job—and at length, diver-like creatures, swaddled, thick-gloved, helmeted, goggles pushed up on foreheads, they are ready. A last check-up. Oxygen apparatus safely aboard ?

Yes.

Inter-cockpit telephones tested ?

Yes.

Survey cameras with the flexible heating cables in position ?

Yes.

Cine cameras ? Spare film-spools ?

Yes.

Electrical gear all in order ?

· All in order.

Remorseless inventory of every item—scores of them, each to be ticked off in its turn—a weariness to men keyed up for a pioneer enterprise. But the minutest detail is momentous where nothing must be left to chance.

Perspiring uncomfortably in their thick suits—but they will be cold enough before long!—they climb in. They are tense, but outwardly composed. Gloved hands wave :

“Cheerio !”

“Happy landings !”

“Sure. See you later !”

The engines are given the “gun,” they rise in a crescendo of sound, then settle to a steady roar; the chocks are removed; the machines lumber forward, gather speed, and with a last rattle of the wheels leave the ground, swift, graceful, purposive.

Rising steadily above the perpetual dust-haze of Nepal, they fly northward, objects of curiosity to the inhabitants of that remote and secretive kingdom. Midget villages are passed: outposts of human society, shielded from the north by the mountains, from the south by political obstacles. In the leading plane are the Marquess of Douglas and Clydesdale as pilot, with Lieutenant-Colonel L. V. S. Blacker as observer. The second plane is piloted by Flight-Lieutenant D. F. M'Intyre, with, as observer, S. R. Bonnett, aerial photographer to the Gaumont-British Film Corporation. Their aim is to make a photo-

graphic survey of Everest and her satellites, oblique and vertical pictures which, placed in a line and slightly overlapping, will fit together like the pieces of a jigsaw puzzle, making connected "strips." Work, this, of the utmost importance to geographers, enabling the mountains and their outskirts to be fixed accurately on the large-scale maps.

Crossing the forest-flanked mountains of Nepal, they rise out of the haze into a sky of dazzling blue at 13,000 feet, and on their right upthrusts the heroic head of Kangchenjunga. Ahead is a small triangle of white: the peak of Everest. Still climbing, up and up into ever colder air, the engines purring confidently; the view begins to expand, ridge and pinnacle leap into view, a bewildering frozen ocean of crests and precipices, rippled glaciers, tree-clad valleys. Heart-chilling, yet exciting beyond words! Everest is coming nearer, its dominant height and splendour growing more apparent every minute; they can distinctly see its streamer blowing stiffly to the westward. To the right and east is Makalu (27,790 feet), beautiful sister peak of Everest, presenting a ridge slashing downward to the glacier like a glittering knife. The whole scene is so stupendous, so awful, the snow of so unearthly a radiance, that the very sound of their engines seems a profanation.

Blacker, gazing down through the hatchway, thrusts the plate-holders into the camera with hands turning numb in his heated gloves. Clydesdale steers the machine ever upward, to clear the ridges of Everest, which are now rushing at them. Midgets in a flimsy box of wood and canvas, sucking oxygen for dear life—everything depending upon the revolutions of a fallible engine and the delicate touch of fingers among a maze of instruments!

Then—a sickening drop; the machine, caught in the mountain's down-draught, hurls down like a leaf over

the South Peak of Everest. For a fraction of a second it seems to the pilot, his mind numbed by altitude, that the whole world rocks and whirls about him. Down. A thousand feet. Two thousand feet. Another few moments and she will be smashed to smithereens. The pilot fights to control her, but dare not jerk the machine up, as her controls are floppy in the thin atmosphere, and if not delicately handled she will stall into a fatal dive. The cliffs are rushing towards them ; he eases her up, slowly, gradually gaining height—the engine is responding manfully. A crack-up seems inevitable. But no : she clears the ridge with so little to spare that Blacker expects the tail-skid to strike.

Whiz ! Over the summit, a tilted floor of snow-mantled rock 500 feet below. Clydesdale sweeps it with his eyes, trying to locate some sign—a cairn or ice axe, or other relics—that Mallory might have left : but he sees nothing. Beyond and around Everest, seeming from this vantage to dwarf her, is an assembly of mountains such as no man has ever gazed on, three hundred miles in extent, a spectacle that stuns the imagination. Blacker is standing now, his shoulders thrust out of the open cockpit roof, panting, feelingless with cold, but with a quick deliberation photographing the summit and the savage rock-face along which the climbing parties have toiled in turn.

Crack—crack—crack ! The machine has entered the ice-plume, rocking giddily. Hurtling bullets of ice hammer on the fuselage, crack the windows of the cockpits. A quick swing round, two more circuits of the summit, more pictures, first from this angle, then from that, the pilot jockeying the machine to provide fresh opportunities for the photographer. The two planes circle for a quarter of an hour, until goggles are encased in ice, and blood seems to have become stationary in the veins. The

metal parts of the machines—telephone apparatus, controls, cameras—feel petrifyingly cold to the touch. Now Clydesdale notes that the oxygen pressure-gauge needles are moving downwards: time to be going, unless they want to gasp their lungs out and go down out of control. So they head away from Everest, the two midge planes that have dared the whirlwind of Everest's breath: southward, towards the gorge of the Arun valley, losing height gradually, throttle wide open to prevent freezing of the carburettor. The 160 miles to Purnea flow rapidly beneath them, and they dip down to the landing field with the consciousness of a duty done and perils survived. As soon as they jump out there is an orgy of questioning and handshaking, shouts of:

“Have you done it?”

“Yes!”

“You got over all right?”

“Right as a trivet!”

M'Intyre and Bonnett, pilot and observer of the second plane, had had an even narrower escape than their colleagues. As they approached the mountain, Bonnett, crouching in his cockpit to load his camera with film, trod on his oxygen feed-pipe, and the jerk as he rose fractured the pipe close to the mask. A thunderous drumming assailed his ears. A desolating sense of weakness swept over him. But holding his slipping faculties in a tight grip, he located the break and bound it round with a handkerchief. Then he slumped unconscious to his knees. As they crossed the summit, M'Intyre, sensing that something was wrong, turned round, and in doing so wrenched away the nosepiece from his mask. With his heavily-gloved fingers he found it impossible to refix the nosepiece, and so had to hold it in place and control the machine with one hand. He was convinced that Bonnett was dead, and for sixty miles he flew in the utmost misery.

Then, to his intense relief, he saw Bonnett struggle to his feet, green in the face, and tug off his oxygen mask. In the denser air at 8,000 feet they could breathe safely, and an hour later, glad to be free of the abominable discomfort of heated clothes—one of M'Intyre's gloves had burnt a blister on his hand—they were rollicking in the swimming-pool at the landing ground.

The financial backing of Lady Houston, O.B.E.—wealthy, large-hearted, a patron of aviation—had made the expedition possible. An ardent imperialist, her imagination had seized upon the project of a flight over Everest as a signal means of impressing upon the world—and especially upon the unruly factions in India—the heroism and dominance of the British race. Representatives of the India Office, the Air Ministry and the Royal Geographical Society succeeded in convincing the government of Nepal that an organized flight to Everest would be in the interests of science and would not constitute any serious violation of their seclusive policy. The Maharaja in particular was extremely cordial to the scheme. A cultured gentleman, living in a sumptuous palace and owning a fleet of motor-cars, he was closely in touch with British and Indian affairs. He had an admiration for England which, curiously enough, dated from the Coronation Durbar in 1911, when King George V visited Nepal for a tiger-shooting expedition. His Majesty's expert marksmanship had left a deep impression upon the Maharaja.

Much toil and deliberation had gone to the expedition—the selection of engines and fuel, altitude flights to try out the apparatus and accustom the observers to their duties, physical fitness tests of the most uncompromising strictness—and now the question was, had the flight justified itself from the scientific point of view?

The answer was clearly No.

The photographic prints of the lower mountains were marred by the dust haze ; there were gaps in the continuous strip ; a misunderstanding between pilot and observer had resulted in pictures of Makalu being taken instead of Everest. A second flight would be necessary.

But the Commandant, Air-Commodore P. F. M. Fellowes, D.S.O., was gravely concerned as to the danger arising from the clumsy oxygen gear, and a flight over Kangchenjunga on April 4th, in which he took part, only deepened his misgiving. On the return journey his oxygen mask proved refractory and he had to descend hurriedly to a safer level where low clouds thwarted navigation. As a result he was obliged to make an emergency landing in Nepal, and ultimately struggled on to a place sixty miles east of Purnea, where an exhausted petrol supply forced him to spend the night. Though they had had some magnificent views of Kangchenjunga, there was too much cloud to allow of effective photography, and it began to look as though the expedition was to be ill-rewarded in its main objective.

News of these mishaps impelled Lady Houston to send a telegram urging abandonment of the idea of a second flight, but she did not give a definite prohibition. But from the governing committee of the expedition, in London, came further cables which amounted to marching orders. The Commandant, apart from his own feelings in the matter, had no option to order an evacuation. There was, he decided, nothing else to be done.

Nothing else to be done ? Yes, there *was* something !

The chief pilots and observers were putting conspiratorial heads together. There was much whispering. A plan took shape. Just one more look at Everest, a last shot at turning the half-failure of the expedition into a success. It could be done. And with decent weather

conditions they might secure a complete survey strip. If they succeeded, their success would be sufficient warrant for the escapade. And if they failed—well, they would be in the position of insubordinates and it could not be helped. But by Jove, it was worth risking ! Worth taking a thousand risks for : not for mere personal glory—that mattered nothing—but for the satisfaction of rounding off their work, justifying the faith of their patron and the expectations of all those, including the Maharaja, whose co-operation had made the flights possible.

To the Commandant, who had retired to bed with a bout of fever, they repaired with the innocent request for a last altitude flight. The Commandant looked at them shrewdly.

Why did they want to go up again ?

For some additional films.

Of Everest ?

Of mountain scenery.

The Commandant thought it over. He appreciated their keenness. To allow such a last flight would not, so far as he could see, in any way violate the trust placed in him. Provided, he told them, that they did not venture too far.

Oh no, they would not go far.

Not, in fact, beyond gliding distance of the plains ? ,
That, they demurely agreed, would be safest.

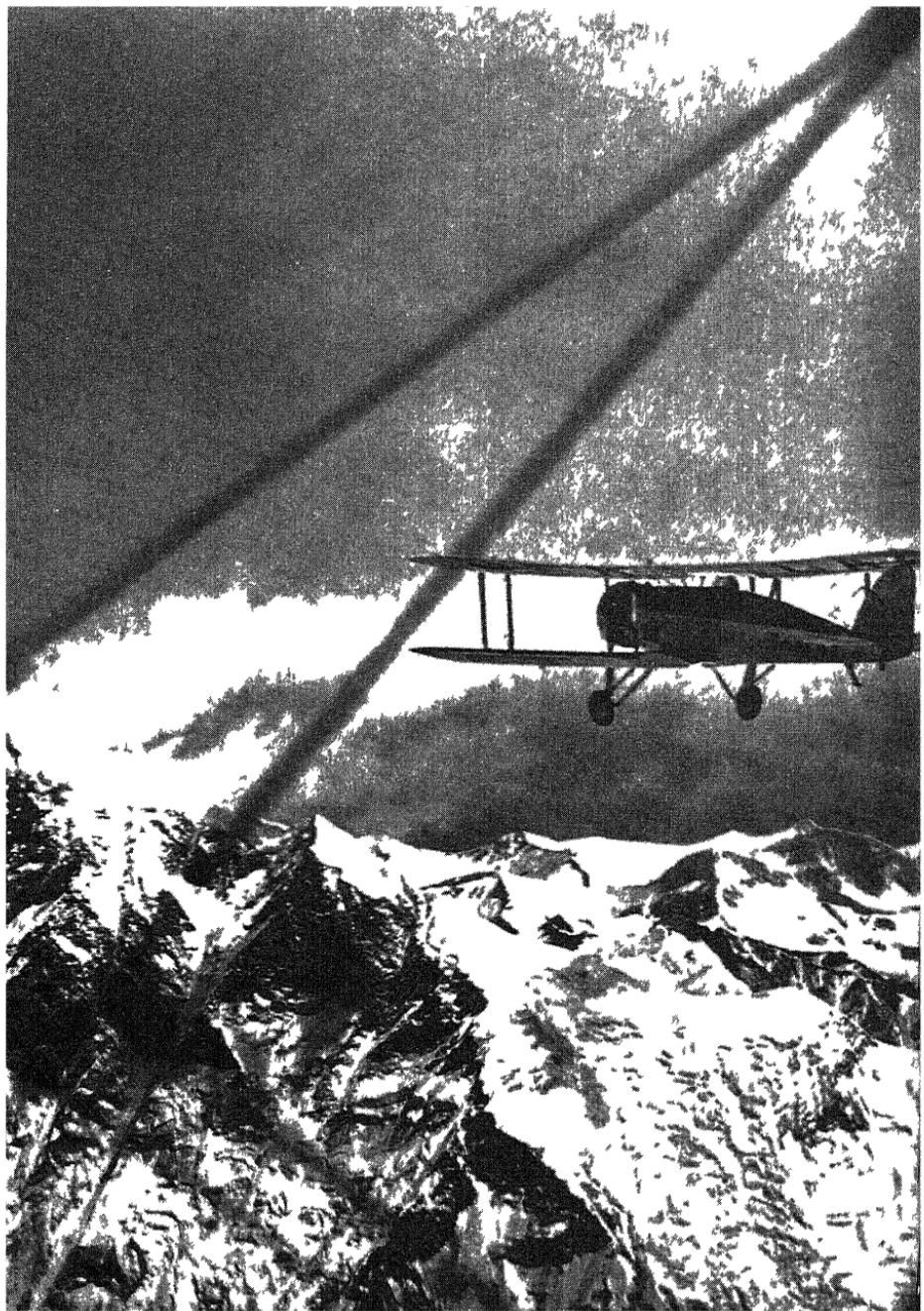
Very well. But remember—

They hurried off before he could extract from them any precise undertakings.

On the night of April 18th they surreptitiously installed the cameras and oxygen apparatus in the machines, and next morning they stole out of their bungalow and took off. Only a few trusted sympathizers were in the know.

This time, on a suggestion of Clydesdale's, they made

APPROACHING THE SOUTH PEAK OF EVEREST



for a point well to the south-west and then, steadily gaining height, swung round to take advantage of the favouring wind. As before, Clydesdale and Blacker were in the leading plane ; M'Intyre piloted the second, with observer A. L. Fisher, Gaumont-British cameraman. The wind was a stiff one and there was much cloud up to 18,000 feet. But as they broke through—airscrews frenziedly toiling to get their grip on the empty air—the view of the Himalaya lifting their heads out of that billowy sea into a dazzle of sunlight was like another, and consecrated, world. Their view extended unbroken over Central Asia, hundreds of miles in every direction : westward to the Karakoram range, northward to the dim summits of the Kuen Lun, eastward to Kangchenjunga and the Brahmaputra that girdles the eastern Himalaya in a vast arc, southward to Nepal—a world of lofty and defiant solitude, the backbone of our spinning planet.

Avoiding the summit—to that degree at least they would observe the edict of authority—they flew round Everest and Makalu, taking a series of vertical views of the south faces and the dozen miles of untrodden, unmapped terrain linking the two mountains. The flight was remarkably lacking in excitement, the most noteworthy incident occurring when M'Intyre's machine came too close to Everest's ice streamer. The pilot felt a terrific bump as though some titan's fist had struck it from beneath. In a state of apprehension which can be imagined, he waited for the cracking, tearing noise of the wings breaking away. Then the stone-heavy plunge into the clouds, down, down, to meet the ground somewhere in an inferno of ruin and flame. . . . But nothing happened. The splendid machine stood the strain.

The pilots flew homeward for an hour above the clouds, by compass course, then dived through the clouds to find themselves above the plains of Nepal ; and the machines

reached the landing field safely within an hour of each other.

Inevitable questions, explanations—"Couldn't possibly resist it. Sorry!"—and now for the test. In their excitement they have taken off their masks, gloves and helmets, and disengaged the wiring of their electric heating system, while still in the air; now, a dash to the darkroom with their precious freight, an hour of anxious waiting, wondering, hoping . . .

It is a pleasure to know that these bold-hearted truants reaped their reward. Pieced together, their survey strips, though not complete, were amazing in their range and precision, rich in geographical features hitherto unsuspected, including two important glaciers. Particularly valuable were those showing in detail the ground between Makalu and Everest. Aerial photography is still a young science, and future expeditions will undoubtedly amplify the survey work of the Houston flights; but in the meantime their photographs have enabled a large relief model to be made of Everest's southern face.

There is one detail, comparatively small in itself, revealed by the photographs which has excited much wonder and speculation. This appears on the survey photographs as a black flat surface, roughly heart-shaped, on the edge of a glacier at 18,000 feet on Everest. It cannot be rock, for at that height and situation rock would be drifted with snow. The geologists say that it is a hot lake lying in a lifted crater, a lake of volcanic origin. Drawing warmth from the bowels of the earth, it defies even Everest's glacial breath: a relic of the time when the earth was still in the throes of creation, and the crust, shrinking to adapt itself to the cooling interior, pushed the Himalaya out of the ocean bottom in heaving lava billows, to stand solid above the world until some new convulsion brings them crashing down

again. Who knows what other surprises this mountain may hold ?

On the heels of the Houston venture, Maurice Wilson. Pitiable, ill-starred, fantastically brave Maurice Wilson. After the superbly equipped and organized attack, the lone flyer. The single-handed warrior challenging a citadel against which the mobilized efforts of some of the world's strongest climbers had failed.

Squadrons of aircraft ? Ridiculous ! In the spring of 1933 Maurice Wilson let it be known that he planned to fly an aeroplane into the neighbourhood of Everest, land it (land an aeroplane in that welter of stony valleys, glaciers, tree-covered gorges !) and proceed on foot to the summit. He seemed breezily unconscious that he was proposing the craziest scheme in all history. Marco Polo seeking the overland route to China, Columbus pointing his cockleshell fleet into the Atlantic, had at least a rational, if revolutionary, theory to work on. But not Maurice Wilson. He knew nothing of the Himalaya, nothing of mountaineering, next to nothing about aircraft. His two assets were a boundless assurance and a strong will. With such qualities a man can do much. But conquer Everest ? No. Wilson was simply flouting every canon of common sense.

The newspapers, scenting a hoax, made but the briefest comments.

But people talked. Some said : " The man is an upstart."

Others tapped their foreheads significantly : " Bees in his bonnet."

Others said : " It's suicide. The man ought to be stopped. Cannot the Government do something about it ? "

What sort of a plane would he fly ? he was asked.

The usual.

Twin-engined and electrically heated ?

Eh ? No.

Equipped with wireless apparatus and oxygen tanks, of course ?

Oh no, just a plane.

Stop fooling !

Experts counselled him, portrayed in the most lurid colours the perilous nature of the undertaking, both as regards the flying and the climbing. He listened, but was unimpressed. They shrugged their shoulders and left him.

Maurice Wilson smiled tolerantly and went on with his plans.

A broad-shouldered Yorkshireman, thirty-five years old, of the tribe of Old Sam and Young Albert, nobody could have looked less like a mystic than Maurice Wilson. But he had probed into the dark labyrinths of Indian philosophy, learned strange secrets of the Yogi subjugation of the body to the mind. He had his case cut and dried. Indian mendicants could lie for days in wet cloths—twenty wet cloths worn one after the other until the warmth of the naked body dried them—and suffer no harm ; could handle fire without blistering ; lie on beds of spikes in apparent comfort. Devout hermits in caves on the mountain sides lived, absorbed in the infinite, scornful of earthly appetites. The same power was his. He could subsist on a minimum of food ; override privation and danger by sheer force of concentration. With such powers he was confident that he could win through where men less occultly disposed had turned back.

But first he had to learn to fly. Even a transcendental spirit will not carry a man far in a machine which he has not mastered. He did learn to fly. He flew in such style that in one of his first solo flights he crashed. So

that, people sneered, was the end of all his fine dreams ! Not a bit of it. He crawled out of the ruins with his enthusiasm undamped. He allowed himself to be photographed standing against a plane and pointing at the sky. Theatrical.

Ever Wrest : the name of his machine summed up the impetus of his adventure.

He arrived in India. He solicited permits to enter Tibet. The authorities coldly refused. Checkmate ? No. He was resourceful as well as determined. Darkening his face and donning Indian clothes, he crossed the Tibetan frontier under cover of darkness and made his way—by what shifts and self-denials it is impossible to know—across those stark plateaux, through gorges and over passes, living on scraps of food, a grim figure exalted above the common necessities of life. At the Rongbuk monastery the Lamas, impressed by his humility, received him kindly.

He collected porters, a mere handful, to help him carry tents up the glacier. They knew Everest better than he did, knew the fearful risks he was taking, but his compelling ardour was too much for them. He had spent weeks learning their language, he understood them and their ways of thought, spoke to them as equals. They did not laugh at him. They respected him. So the little party, the strangest that ever joined issue with a Himalayan mountain, defiled up the glacier. What did he think, this strange young fanatic, as he saw the sombre bulk of Everest before him, its plumed head, its face of yellow and black rock, its outworks of ice, its heaped and riven courtyard of glacier ? Did he flinch then, as even hard-bitten campaigners have flinched ? Did he, for the first time, see his dreams for the preposterous things they were ? If he did, he showed no sign. When the porters at length halted and started to pitch their tents, he would

not stay with them. He would go on. They reasoned with him. Pleaded. Evening was at hand, Everest's night would be deathlike, it was folly to go on. He was obdurate. The spell of the mountain drew him onward like a moth to a candle, his destiny was linked with it. What was there to fear ? He would find his way by the relics of the last Everest expedition. He had a one-man collapsible tent. He had food : fruit, cereals, sweet-stuffs—these and his will to win. Enough to conquer the mountain—any mountain—with. He would come back. They must wait fourteen days for him, he enjoined. Helplessly they agreed.

So into that theatre of ice and rock and storm, grim abode of the Snowmen, he drove his tired limbs, in his hand a Union Jack to plant on the summit, in his rucksack a diary book and a camera. They watched him climbing among the seracs ; he turned once and waved, shouted something they did not catch ; then they saw him no more. . . .

They were faithful. Hoping against hope, they waited, not fourteen days, but four weeks. But he never returned. The mountain claimed him, as it was bound to do. In the glacier, at a height of 21,000 feet, lying stiff in the snow, the 1936 expedition found him, with his Union Jack hardened by ice and his diary, containing his last confused scribbles, lying at his side. In spite of his mystical ideal, the faith that is said to move mountains, he was the easiest of Everest's victims. He had consumed his own life in the furnace of his ambition.

Madness ? Perhaps. But a madness that deserves respect.

And suppose he had succeeded ! Suppose—befriended by good weather, luck, or that spirit guide whose consolation Smythe had experienced—he had reached the summit ! What acclamations he would have received,

what medals and titles showered upon him by learned societies, what clamorous headlines in the press, what banquets, what frantic cables from Hollywood! Books would have been written to immortalize him. As it was, he got but a shadowy fame which is quickly fading, a grave in the ice under the shadow of the mountain, and a memorial cairn which the glacier, ever splitting and reshaping itself, will one day bury beyond reclaim.

CHAPTER VII

KANGCHENJUNGA AND NANDA DEVI

FROM the vale of the rushing Ranjit River the traveller climbs through belts of vegetation, forcing his way through a thickly matted jungle hung with rope-like creepers and carpeted with exotic flowers, where the air is thick as steam ; past groves of bamboo and fig ; and out on to a hillside slashed by ravines down which thunder the mountain torrents. The air grows cooler, the underwood thins, there come belts of sombre pines, slanting writhen trees whose roots snake down among the rocks to find stability against the winds. At last the upper pastures are reached, twinkling with Alpine gentian, edelweiss and poppy, a carpet of fairylike blooms creeping to the very edge of the snow line. Beyond, forbidding further advance, stretches the petrified deluge of the glacier, birthplace of the torrents : hanging corridors leading to the group of pinnacles which is Kangchenjunga, third highest mountain of the Himalaya. A world above the world, stricken and callous : a loneliness to bring a chill to the spine.

Kangchenjunga is not a single peak, but a massif of mountains jutting out southwards from the major Himalaya range : a confusion of peaks, glaciers, rock-walled valleys which have never known the tread of man. The natives, with their fine instinct for names, call Kangchenjunga "The Five Treasures of the Snow," and they believe that it is the abode of a god upon whose whim the safety of their crops depends. It is darkly whispered that in the past this god has been placated with human sacrifices.

Her ridges sharp as a razor, her walls mailed in ice hundreds of feet in thickness, Kangchenjunga stands

inviolate and, in the opinion of many climbers, invincible. He who would wrestle with her must prepare for snowstorms and avalanches surpassing even those of Everest. On the very first attempt to climb the mountain (in 1905) Kangchenjunga showed her savagery by slaying four porters and one Swiss climber in an avalanche. A second expedition, led by Doctor Farmer, an American, in 1929, also came to grief. The porters lagging owing to poor boots, Farmer left them and went on alone to take photographs. Disappearing into a mist, he was never seen again. These attempts were badly promoted and conducted by men of small Himalayan experience, and were destined to failure from the start. But in the same year as Farmer's expedition the mountain met more redoubtable foemen in the persons of nine Bavarian climbers under the leadership of Dr. Paul Bauer. All were picked men of proven mountain craft, and they were aided by seventeen Sherpa and eight Bhutia porters, some of whom had attained the most coveted distinction of their profession, having "carried" on Everest.

The expedition was a model of versatile technique, diligence and courage in the face of almost overwhelming odds. A Base Camp was laid down on the Zemu Glacier, and after weeks of reconnaissance a route was chosen along a sword-edged, steeply rising ridge of ice flanked by precipices raked with stonefalls and avalanches. The ridge could be reached only by the ascent of an immense ice-wall. Picture the steep side of a sixty-degree triangle, carry this line up for three-quarters of a mile, and imagine it sheeted with smooth ice and thrashed by wind, and you may begin to appreciate the problems involved. Boulders falling and bursting into thousands of fragments as they struck—it was like being swept with shell-fire—made the ascent a distasteful grind. And then, when the ridge was almost achieved, a blizzard forced them back. They

returned and hacked a fresh staircase in the ice—now clinging to minute bulges on the solid wall, now, for lack of better support, standing on a companion's head, often hanging on a rope whose only support was a prong of ice : human flies creeping up step by step, undauntedly assailing the impossible. Twice more the weather confounded their efforts, and snow plugged up the hard-won steps. But they persevered, and at last they were on the crest of the ridge. And what they saw ahead of them was enough to turn back any less intrepid party on the spot. Freakishly twisted rock towers, clefts filled with draperies of ice, hanging pillars vast as the supports of a cathedral : promise of weeks of heart-breaking toil. But they set to work, climbing, cutting, steeplejacking one above another, in places where a false step would have hurled the entire party to destruction. After the steeplejacking, navvying. They had to hack tunnels through huge cornices ; and sometimes they encountered overhanging shelves and bulges of solid snow which could not be circumvented : they fell to with their axes and flogged them away, fragment by fragment—hour upon hour of arm-wearying effort.

They had no oxygen to facilitate breathing, and so severe was the task that the ascent of a beggarly thousand feet—an hour or two's walking on an English mountain—took thirteen days. They laid camps as they went, more often than not in places melodramatically insecure and exposed—and to these camps the burdened porters had to be escorted. Such prodigies of labour had never before been performed on a mountain, and it is doubtful whether they will be performed again. That it could be done at all over the 20,000 feet level borders upon the miraculous. Camp X, at 22,000 feet, was nothing but a cave dug in the ice, with a tiny entrance which let in the arctic blasts. But by this time inflictions of the harshest

nature were the daily lot, and everyone bore them stoically.

Now two of the climbers went on ahead to prospect a way. They climbed to over 24,000 feet in sticky knee-deep snow, and returned with the cheering news that the worst difficulties were past ; the way was clear to the summit.

“ Who can tell the balancings of the clouds ? ” says the author of the Book of Job, and he might have been thinking of the Himalaya. For now, as on Everest, the villainous power of the Himalaya to undo all man’s work when the prize seems to be within his clutch, was once more displayed. Monstrous black clouds filled the sky, the cold deepened, snow—that ruthless enemy of the mountaineer—began to fall. For two days they were besieged within their ice camp. On the third day the clouds had blown off, but the sky was a shrill green, unmistakable omen of worse weather to come. Food was running short, and a climber with an empty stomach is beaten before he starts. Further progress was thus debarred. The vital necessity was to retire before the conditions of the snow lower down became unmanageable. Communications were cut off, and with every hour the situation grew more disquieting.

High winds and the unstable nature of the surface made the descent a nightmare struggle. The snow frequently glissaded. Once Bauer, by tugging back on the rope, saved one of his companions and two porters by an effort so taxing that it was a quarter of an hour before he could summon up the strength to go on.

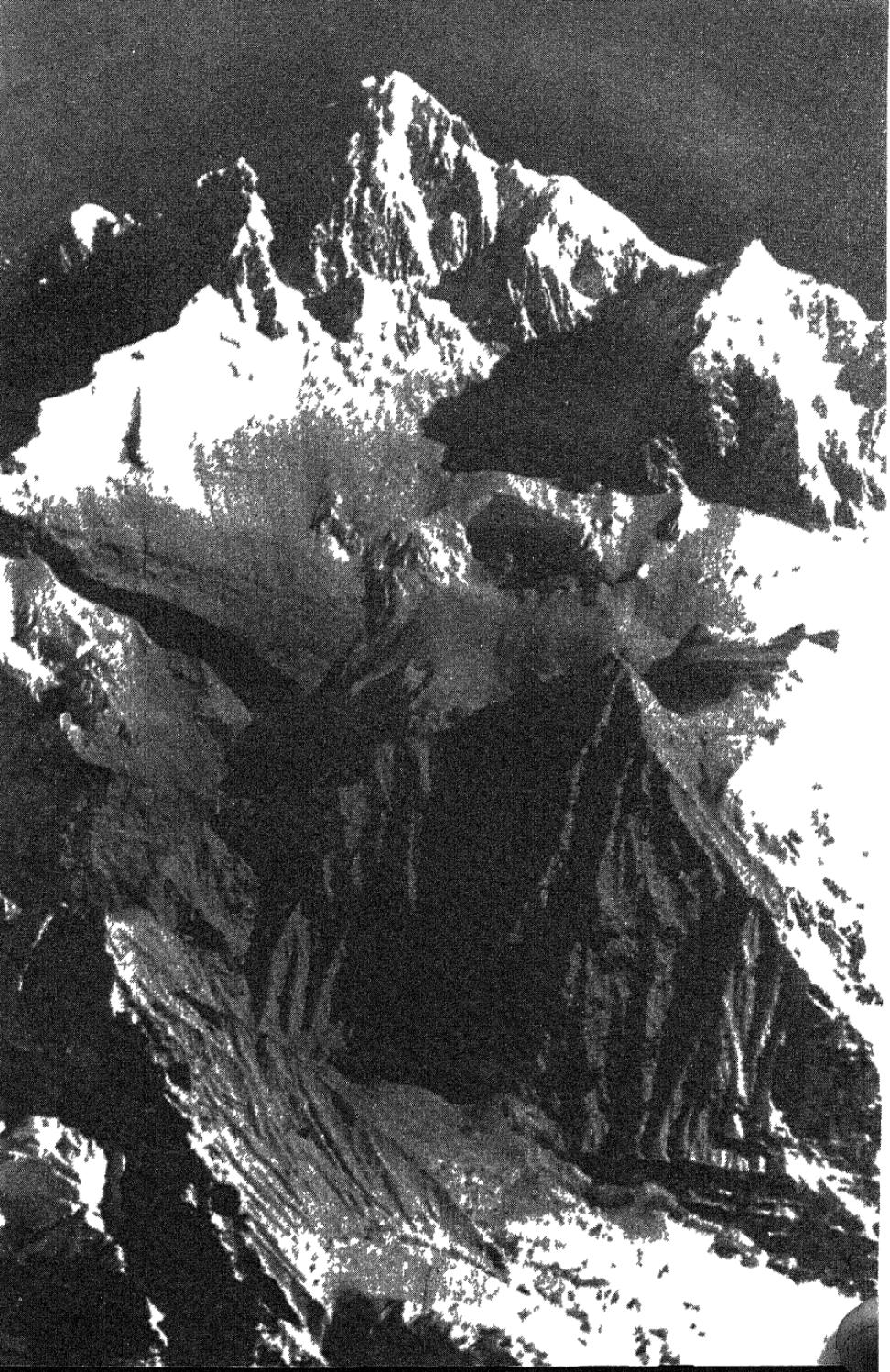
Already badly knocked up, they had to dig out Camp IX from under seven feet of snowdrift before they could creep in and abandon themselves to what mountaineers whimsically call a night’s rest.

Next day their difficulties were increased by the exhaus-

tion and fear of the porters, and so, desperately taking a chance, they got rid of half the loads by throwing them down a precipice on to the Twins Glacier. This was burning their boats with a vengeance. But worse was to come. Most of their provisions and bivouac material were lost when one of the porters slipped, and the night was spent in the open, on the snow, an ordeal of agonizing sleeplessness. In the morning they were sick and weak, and their beards were glued to their jackets with ice.

Day after day, hounded by the malignancy of the elements, they fought their way downwards. Beigel, one of the climbing party, contracted frostbite in his feet and had to be carried—a terrible addition to difficulties already sufficiently great—and it took them over a week to descend from the highest camp to the Base. Then, dirty, thick-bearded, aching and dead-beat, they straggled down the glacier, routed but glad to have escaped with their lives. Kangchenjunga derisively pelted them with stones and mud as they went.

Two more attempts were made to scale Kangchenjunga, and both were inconclusive. In 1930—the year after Bauer's repulse—a team of picked European climbers under the leadership of Professor Dihrenfurth, and including the indefatigable Frank Smythe, was almost wiped out when a segment of the ice-wall, huge as a block of flats, broke away and fell, in a thundering cataclysm, in the very track of the advancing party. One porter was crushed to death; miraculously there were no other casualties. But the collapse of the ice-wall, depositing thousands of tons of ice debris, destroyed the route which had been cut out with great difficulty, and Dihrenfurth decided to try another line to the summit. This, by way of the North-West Ridge, turned out to be even more sensational than the route of Bauer's



KANGCHENJUNGA

warriors, for, in addition to ice, there were rock pinnacles so unstably rooted that they swayed at a touch. A hanging rock platform seemed to present the only flaw in the mountain's armour, but it led merely to overhanging walls where climbing was not to be thought of. It was soon obvious that the problem of bringing up porters with the baggage was insuperable without an elaborate fixed system of ropes ; and in any case there was no ledge sufficiently broad and firm to accommodate tents.

Moreover, while the Bavarian expedition had been fortunate in choosing the more sheltered side of the mountain, Dyhrenfurth's men were constantly flogged by high winds—so much so that the camp at the foot of the cliff had to be barricaded with ice blocks to curb its tendency to take wing.

Can Kangchenjunga be climbed ? Smythe says that by the Dyhrenfurth route over the North-West Ridge the mountain is utterly impregnable. Nature designed Kangchenjunga's precipices in more heroic proportions than Everest's ; its rock is treacherously loose ; and its curtains of ice offer climbing problems which only a most lavishly organized and spirited attack will overcome. The mountain's proneness to avalanches, caused by thawing as the air currents rise out of the humid valleys, is another factor. Finally, transport to the Base Camp is much more irksome than on Everest. The Dyhrenfurth climbers had to live principally on yak's meat, and their health suffered in consequence.

"The man who attempts Kangchenjunga," Bauer declared, "is an optimist." He himself answers the description well, for his experiences in 1929 led this astonishing man to hope that, given reasonable weather, he could yet reach the summit. In 1931 he was once

more at grips with the mountain. The ridge on which his 1929 expedition had cut a track was heaped with new snow-formations; they made a fresh track, and then to their disgust a day of mild weather—mild, that is, for the Himalaya—thawed away the surface, and the work had to be commenced all over again.

Then fate struck.

It happened in a moment. To evade an obstacle one of the climbers—Schaller, a man with many hair-raising Alpine feats to his credit—worked his way round a rib of ice into a steep gully by which the crest of the ridge could be gained. One porter followed him. A second stood with the rope belayed round the ice-rib. With sickening suddenness the porter in the gully missed his step, shot downward and collided with Schaller, sending him down the gully in a great bound. The rope snapped on the edge of the rib. A scream, a rattle of falling stones, and the horrified onlookers saw the two men hurtle out of sight towards the glacier below. Stunned by this tragedy as they were, “For us,” Bauer says, “the continuance of the attack on Kangchenjunga was a foregone conclusion and a duty.”

After working for a week in continuous snowstorms, completely shut off from the world around and below, they reached 23,000 feet, and here they scooped out an ice-cave—Camp X, a trifle above the corresponding camp of 1929. Five more days were occupied in reaching 25,000 feet. Defiant of the evil weather, and dourly putting out of their minds the thought of that fell rampart of ice that would have to be negotiated should bad conditions force a withdrawal, they won their way forward little by little, hoping to make a final camp at 27,000 feet. From that point, they judged, the last 1,000 feet would be comparatively simple. But snow continuing to fall, the surface of the upper slopes became

highly unsafe: thin, incoherent stuff that gave their boots no purchase. Strongly tempted as they were to make an all-or-nothing raid upon the summit, they obeyed the dictates of caution and at 26,000 feet called off the attack.

Bauer, though he had failed, had shown what could be done. Upon the shoulders of his attempt, so to speak, a future party will doubtless go even higher. What has been done once can be done again. Given a period of suitable snow conditions, good visibility, and freedom from wind, it is just possible that one day the mountain will be climbed. On the other hand, it may be that only by a totally new climbing technique, at present unknown, will this pitiless storm-goddess of the Himalaya be quelled.

Nanda Devi, the highest mountain in the British Empire, is an exploratory as much as a purely mountaineering problem. It stands at about the centre of the Himalayan range, marking the border of Tibet and British Garhwal, and is separated from the snow-peaks of Nepal by the Gori River. The valley of the Gori River (called the Milam Valley) forms the main highway between India and Western Tibet. Local tradition has it that long ago the people of the Milam Valley were covered with fur like animals. On the Gori Glacier there lived an enormous bird of prey which had a sweet tooth for hairy humans, and its inroads upon the population were a source of continual terror. A kindly Tibetan Lama sent one of his servants over the mountain passes to rid the valley of this vile creature. It was, the legend goes on, the journey of this servant which established the route between the two states. The monster was killed, but by this time the tribes of the hairy men had all been eaten. The servant liked the valley and decided

to settle in it, but was disappointed at the lack of salt. The Lama considerably visited the valley and with his own hands sprinkled salt about the soil like grain. To this day the valley is rich in a salty grass beloved by the animals, and the Tibetans drive their herds over the border to graze upon it.

No mountain in the world occupies so peculiar and sequestered a position as Nanda Devi. A jumbled ring of cliffs, ridges and hanging glaciers—a gigantic breast-work seventy miles long—encloses a sanctuary from which Nanda Devi lifts its twin peaks to 25,660 feet. From afar these peaks, with their classic shoulders draped with snow, are an inspiring sight. Before Eric Shipton's expedition of 1932 their lower parts were unknown. There had been several attempts to penetrate into the inner basin, but with only limited success. Longstaff, General Bruce, Ruttledge, Somervell, not one of these doughty climbers got through. Shipton's expedition consisted of himself and his friend H. W. Tilman, and three native porters. There was no official cook, but the porters quickly became expert in conjuring up tasty meals, and one of them developed a positive passion for washing up. Compared with the regiments of Everest, such a corps seems puny ; but Shipton, a young man of fresh and flexible ideas, was convinced that a small force had the advantage of a larger one in its superior mobility, greater latitude to adapt itself to circumstances, and closer understanding between its members.

Starting from Kathgodam, they passed through cultivated valleys, up watersheds and over passes where snow lay unmelted in the fierce rays of the sun, through woods of sweet-smelling pine, until they reached the foot of the Rishi Ganga Gorge, the only crack in the beetling walls which hide the lower slopes of Nanda Devi from the eyes of the world. Three and a half miles in

length, this gorge, as Shipton was soon to appreciate, is on the true Himalayan scale. It is a "box" gorge: that is, its sides fall sheer to the river's edge, leaving practically no shore. Walls of rock thousands of feet in height, black, clammy, crumbling; grass-grown fissures, immense overhanging bulges, gashes choked with trickling earth, boulders as big as houses, trees uprooted by the landslips: a bleak and uninviting place indeed. To traverse the gorge by the river-bed was impossible; they had to climb up on to the wall itself and work their way along by such fissures and terraces as offered themselves. Many false starts they made: promising-looking ledges petered out to nothing; and considerable time was wasted in this way. They dared not hurry, for the laden porters (for whom they had to string up the more difficult traverses with rope fastened to the rock with "pitons"—iron pegs) had to transport all the party's belongings—550 lbs. of kit and provisions. Often the bales had to be taken from the porters' shoulders and dragged bodily up the cliff by a climber squatting on a ledge no wider than a mantelshelf: work calling for a cool head and a nice sense of poise. When snow fell they climbed on stocking feet to improve their foothold. At first everyone was nervous and shaky; even the porters ceased the monotonous chanting with which they were wont to alleviate their labours; but as they grew more accustomed to the awful immensity and weird echoes of the gorge, all recovered their spirits.

One of the worst ordeals was when, as frequently happened, they had to descend and cross the torrent itself. One Sahib had first to go over with a rope round his waist, and, when across, tie the rope to a tree or rock so that it served as a handrail for the others. The water was searingly cold. The whirling, foam-capped flood would dizzy him and swing each leg around as he

lifted it to take a stride. Its onrush hurled hundreds of sharp stones against his legs. It was an intense relief to crawl out on the other side and chafe his numbed and bleeding legs back to life.

So for a month they worked along the gorge, choosing and rejecting routes, sometimes baffled and dejected, at other times exultant. At length, just as it seemed that they had reached deadlock, they found the longed-for track into their promised land, the key with which Nanda Devi's prison gates could be unlocked. The way led up on to a huge buttress. Apparently quite an unclimbable proposition for laden men, it yet yielded them a narrow gully. Up and up they went—nasty bits here and there, but good going on the whole—out of that satanic gorge whose torrent's Niagara-boom still followed them. Would they be turned back at the last by unclimbable rock? If so, their expedition was ended, for there appeared to be no other exit from the gorge. At last, tense with excitement, they saw a grassy plateau above them: the rim of Nanda Devi's encircling walls. They hurried breathlessly on to the plateau. Before them lay the huge arena. But they were disappointed. It was raining. Nanda Devi was shrouded. They saw nothing but fragments of white and green in the rifts of the flying mist. Then, towards sunset, as they sat contentedly round their crackling juniper fire, the rain blew off. Nanda Devi doffed her veils, and rose into the dramatic light of evening like a goddess, so pure and lofty that she seemed to be carven of cloud and sunlight; and then the nameless ranges to the north followed suit, and soon the world about the travellers was a sacrificial splendour of silver and rose peaks, with Nanda Devi sovereign over all.

The days that followed were full of discovery and wonder.

The ice-piled slopes of the glaciers, the solitude and might of the paraded mountains, were rewards enough in themselves ; but they were softened and enriched by other features. Up the sides of the mountains ran fields of grass which, newly arisen from its winter covering, was tender and brilliantly green. Wild rhubarb grew in abundance ; and, set like jewels in the ice troughs, they came upon lakes of the profoundest blue and purple. Herds of wild sheep and goats roamed the pastures, creatures which, never having seen man before, gazed at these intruders with shy curiosity. Of a morning, as the party boiled tea and struggled with frozen puttees, they would be greeted with the dawn-song of thousands of birds ; and once—a most touching discovery in that world of fabulous grandeurs—they found a nest containing three grey-blue eggs of a snow pigeon. Nature is still the supreme artist, and in such contrasts the Himalaya excels.

They spent three weeks in hard work, getting afoot by three o'clock in the morning and returning to camp before the afternoon snow-storms set in. They pushed their way up the main glacier, explored several subsidiary glaciers, climbed some of the encircling slopes, and plotted and measured many of the peaks on their plane-table ; toilsomely, but with a happy sense of something done once and for all, unravelling bit by bit the complex physical features of the basin.

Then, as their provisions were dwindling, and the approaching monsoon was likely to swell the Rishi Ganga, making the gorge impassable, they bade a reluctant farewell to Nanda Devi, and descended again into the gorge. They groped their way down in a thunder-storm, whose dazzling flashes and incessant reverberations of thunder enhanced the weirdness and savagery of the scene. Thrashed by icy rain, hampered by bad visibility,

they found the traverse along the cliff-side a wearing business, and they were heartily relieved when they emerged from the gorge into more tractable country. So battered and unkempt were they, that the first persons they met—some shepherds from one of the hill-side villages—ran away at their approach, taking them for the sinister demons believed to inhabit the upper gorge. But they were happy at heart, for they had completed an expedition which will always stand out as one of the masterpieces of Himalayan climbing: an expedition that has something of the gaiety of a schoolboy's holiday jaunt, sharply different from the militant spirit of the campaigns against Everest and Kangchenjunga.

According to the old Hindu legend, the gods Brahma, Siva and Vishnu assumed the forms of mountains, and when the Earth, alarmed because the rocks and glaciers prevented the spreading of plant life, asked the reason for this, Vishnu said "The pleasures of mountains transcend mere humanity. As mountains the gods will dwell on the earth for the benefit of mankind." The man of the east—with his instinctive culture and religious innocence—comes to nature for spiritual stimulus. The western man, theologically a ruffian but master of many inventions, seeks from nature an enlargement of his dominion over living things. Intuition and logic, the divining crystal and the test-tube—eternal incompatibles! It is a practical certainty that the hill tribes, could they ally to their physical vigour the drive of ambition and a talent for organization, would conquer the Himalaya with comparative ease. But they do not. It is outside their province. Their upbringing is against it. Their religion forbids it. Hence, the man of the east is content to abase himself in adoration before the mountains, to creep at their knees and with planted prayer flags and

muttered litanies implore their mercy. But the western man comes with a battle array of tools and tackle, ropes and ice axes ; sets up his fluttering tent-town, snail-like carries his home on his back, his warmth, his food and his very air in portable containers ; comes girt with ambition and armed with foresight, and domineeringly plants a nailed boot on the face of the god. But the two attitudes—rational west, superstitious east—are of a piece, for to the western and the eastern mind the appeal is the same : the mountain draws, entrals. Its lonely places are the vestiges of an early age, an age of child-like wonder, when the earth was to man the fountain-head of myths and miracles. The mountain fastnesses are unspoiled, fresh and fair from Nature's hand, and every sunrise there is as the light of the First of Mornings, when God moved upon the waters and light was born. Though the tyrannies of the mountains drive him away, man needs must return.

So with Shipton and Tilman. They had broken through Nanda Devi's fortifications and, first of living men since the mountains were made, had stood within the citadel. The vision of Nanda Devi, massive and shining from summit to base, was something to haunt them all their lives. But it was not enough. Though they had prospected a line on the mountain up to 21,000 feet, Nanda Devi was still unclimbed. A spur they had found leading on to the South Ridge seemed to offer a practicable route : their labours would remain abortive until they had put it to the test.

In August 1936 the mountain was attacked by a body of British and American mountaineers organized by the Harvard Mountaineering Club. It was led by Professor Graham Brown and included Shipton and Tilman, as well as N. E. Odell, the geologist who last saw Mallory and Irvine on Everest. The Rhamani

River, which intersects the Rishi Ganga at the foot of the Rishi Ganga Gorge, was in full torrent, and some of the coolies, unmanned by the prospect of such a crossing, deserted on the spot. By superhuman efforts one of the party got across with a rope, and all the loads were safely transported. An advance base camp was established in the inner basin, and then six more camps were laid down on the South Ridge discovered by Shipton and Tilmann, Camp II being a single tent under a wall of rock on a snow-shelf giddily perched on a precipice edge. Between Camp IV (21,700 feet) and Camp V (23,500 feet) the way led across a precipitous snow-slope, only passable by the exercise of the most accomplished mountain finesse. The assault was repeatedly interrupted by storms, and the carrying so severely taxed the porters that the climbers themselves relieved them of the greater portion of their load. Mercifully the mountain presented none of the fearsome difficulties encountered on Kangchenjunga. Seven weeks of climbing were crowned by the achievement of the summit : the highest summit which has yet fallen to man.

So one by one the mountains on the roof of the world yield to man's challenge. Mount Kabru, climbed by Graham in 1883, Trisul, climbed by Longstaff in 1907, Kamet, climbed by Smythe in 1931, Nanda Devi. Every year sees new converts to Himalayan climbing : young men with stout hearts, strong limbs, staying power and experience cast eyes of longing at those virgin privacies ; the brave ventures of Mallory, Smythe, Somervell, Kellas, Shipton and many another have raised the standard of achievement, and youth will not be content until it has followed in their steps. Chomolönzo, Chomolhari, Kangchenjunga, Nanga Parbat, the Karakorams—names resounding like a sequence of chords in a symphony—the day will come when all have been subdued, their mysteries

unriddled, their terrors set at naught. Man will penetrate into more and more of those secluded arcadies of the valleys: with no profane tread, but humbly and reverently: not to exploit or ravage, but to worship at the long-guarded shrines of the earth. The emotion that came to Shipton on encountering the marvels and beauties of the Nanda Devi basin—he tells us how he ran in breathless excitement round the valley bends to see what lay ahead—will be granted to many others, for the earthly paradise of the Himalaya is so rich and various that man will never exhaust it. Each new generation will discover it afresh. May they accept this heritage in a grateful spirit, with remembrance of the pioneers by whose efforts it was won !

CHAPTER VIII

NANGA PARBAT

CRACK!

Boom!

A mass of suspended ice has broken. It begins to push and rattle its way down a gully. It falls out of the gully on to a broad ice face. It moves with an inexorable deliberation. Its weight and motion loosen more ice; a huge tract of snow is set wrinkling and sliding. The mass leaps over a shelf of rock and hurtles thousands of feet down the sheer precipice to the slopes below. Uncountable tons in weight, it throws up columns of dazzling dust which blot the precipices from view. It is a spectacle at once calamitous and beautiful. Down into the glacier rushes the ever-growing mass, powerful enough to sweep away a town. Its sound is like a bombardment of guns. Its echoes reverberate around the valley, thrown back redoubled from the mountain walls. The dreaded avalanche!

The climbers on the slope on the other side of the glacier, half blinded, wipe the ice crystals from their faces. They look at each other without speaking. This is Nanga Parbat's ominous welcome. They know what disaster this beautiful mountain can work. They are not afraid. They are thrilled. Their eyes shine.

Such avalanches are common on Nanga Parbat—"Mountain of Horror"—the 26,000-feet peak which dominates the Western Himalaya; A. F. Mummery, one of the precursors of climbing in the Caucasus and the Himalaya, had lost his life in one when, in 1895, he attempted with two Gurkha companions the crossing of the ridge which runs northwest from the summit.

Though 3,000 feet less than Everest in height, Nanga Parbat is a mountain of the most awe-inspiring character, standing in exalted loneliness over the torrid sands of the Bunji Plain, her haughty summit guarded by precipices lifting sheer from her attendant ice-fields. The mountain is perpetually mantled with ice, which the hot sun sets thawing and sliding. Such conditions make climbing excessively difficult and dangerous. But Merkl and his party were no tyros, and on this summer's afternoon in 1934, with the prospect of coming to grips with the mountain in a few days, each man felt the thrill of ambition and the desire to give of his best.

The Base Camp was in a meadow on the plateau at the foot of the mountain. Twelve thousand feet high, it had been reached only after days of grinding toil up the icy labyrinth of the Rakhiot Glacier. The tents, provisions and general supplies had been brought up by the native porters in relays. The labour of establishing the camp had been considerable, for the plateau was under deep snow and a large crater had had to be dug out before the tents could be fixed. Both climbers and porters had been severely taxed by the long trek from Darjeeling, under a tyrannous sun. But all were happy, and on fine mornings as the mists cleared and the birch-trees dropped their feathers of snow, and the crest of Nanga Parbat stood out lofty and sparkling, they laughed and joked for the sheer joy of living.

They were fine men, wrought granite-like by years of struggle with the mountains: men typical of the younger generation of German climbers in their forthright aggressive methods, their love of danger for its own sake, their eagerness to pit themselves against formidable odds. All had earned good reputations for themselves in the Alps, and most of them had belonged to the party which put up a noble, if a losing, battle against Nanga Parbat

two years earlier. The climbing group consisted of : Peter Aschenbrenner, Fritz Bechtold, Alfred Drexel, Erwin Schneider, Willi Welzenbach, Uli Wieland, and the leader, Willy Merkl. There was also a doctor, Willy Bernard, the photographer, Peter Mülritter, and a camp commandant to supervise the setting up of tents, food supplies, the payment of the porters, and the like. Food was plentiful, and petrol-cookers ensured a supply of cocoa and soups. The expedition was equipped with short-wave wireless apparatus for communication between the camps : unfortunately it let them down, and such messages as they contrived to transmit were of a blurred and fragmentary nature.

On May 27th, with the temperature at two degrees above freezing-point, Mülritter, Wieland and Bechtold set off up the glacier to establish Camp I. The glacier was heaped with masses and whirls of ice, thickly crusted with snow, and considerable care was necessary. They established the camp under the face of the mountain itself ; next day they were driven back to the Base by a blizzard.

By May 31st Welzenbach had erected Camp II at a height of 17,550 feet, and for a few days there was a constant procession of the wiry little porters ascending and descending with baggage. Mülritter was perpetually at work with his camera, thrusting in the plates with an almost mystical look in his eyes. The chastity of the snow, the desolate wreckage of the glacier ice, the sapphire shadows defining cornice and cliff, the whole austere architecture of the mountain, transported him.

On June 6th Welzenbach, Drexel, Schneider and Aschenbrenner pushed on from Camp II and at a height of 19,400 feet set up Camp III. A snowstorm flurried about them, and the flying clouds of snow whipped off the slopes draped most of the mountain from their eyes.

There were crevasses often as deep as 200 feet: sometimes a way had to be found of skirting these, others were spanned by slender brackets of snow. These were only too apt to fall in under pressure, and only one man could traverse at a time, the others holding a taut rope to save him in the event of his slipping through. They were all exhausted when they pitched their tents, especially Drexel, who had got separated from the others and arrived last.

His comrades expressed solicitude for him.

"It's nothing," he said, flopping down. "But my head aches."

Fagged-out as he was, he tossed sleeplessly all that night. In the morning, to the alarm of the others, he became delirious.

"You must go down," they urged.

But he refused.

The storm having blown itself out, Aschenbrenner and Schneider set out to find a site for Camp IV. On their return in the afternoon Drexel, who was now blue in the face and breathing stertorously, consented to return to Camp II, where medical aid was available. He was obviously suffering, but his spirit was undefeated.

"See you again at Camp IV" were his parting words as, helped by his native orderly, he struggled away on two ski sticks.

The orderly, Angtsering, arrived at Camp II alone.

"Sahib Drexel," he said, "is following. He is ill. I came ahead to warn you."

Mülritter promptly set out in search of him and brought him in. They were shocked to see how ill he looked. His feet dragged and there were beads of moisture on his forehead.

"You stay with him," Mülritter said to Bechtold.

"I'll bring Doctor Bernard." And he set out in the dusk to make the toilsome journey to Camp I.

Drexel and Bechtold lay down together in their sleeping-bags. Drexel was shivering. For a while they talked of the coming attack on the summit, but presently the sick man began to cough. He held his chest and his face twisted.

"That hurts, Fritz," he groaned.

"Try and get some sleep, old fellow."

Towards midnight he fell asleep, but it was a broken and feverish sleep. They rose at 8 a.m. Drexel seemed a little better. There was no sign of the doctor yet.

"Could you manage the journey?" Bechtold asked.

"We ought to get down to Camp I."

"Yes." It was a rustling whisper from cracked lips.

But Bechtold knew it was impossible. Drexel's face was haggard as a death-mask. His hands shook. He could scarcely stand.

Two hours later he sank into a coma. He made no response when Bechtold bathed his burning temples with snow. He lay thus until the afternoon, when Bernard arrived. Bernard whistled under his breath as he sounded the sick man.

"What is it, doctor?"

"Pneumonia, I'm afraid."

"Is it—bad?"

Bernard nodded miserably.

Oxygen was hurried up, but it was too late. At twilight, while a storm raged without and the avalanches boomed down the mountain-side, Drexel smiled contentedly and died.

Runners were sent with the dreadful news to the other camps, and at sunrise Drexel's body was reverently carried on a rough litter down through the tortuous seracs to the Base Camp. On a hillock outside the

camp they buried him: a heap of stones was erected and surmounted by a cross carved by Aschenbrenner. They garlanded the stones with flowers. Merkl spoke briefly of their dead comrade's courage and of the cause for which he had laid down his life.

"May his spirit be ours," he concluded. "May his steadfastness and his beautiful example inspire us in the task that lies before us."

They prayed. They concluded the simple service with the mountaineer's song. As they walked back to camp, in silence, each busy with his thoughts, the melting snows sang their tiny song, and the ramparts of Nanga Parbat shone above them in the evening glow. The first link in the expedition's tragic destiny had been forged.

Delays of various kinds held up the second attack upon the mountain, but at last, on June 22nd, six Sahibs and fourteen porters left the Base Camp in sparkling sunlight and picked their way up the glacier. The snow was softening in the burning sun and frequently the porters, under their heavy loads, sank to their waists. The bridges of snow over the crevasses were especially tricky and much time was lost in negotiating them. Everyone was parched with thirst, and it was as much as Merkl could do to prevent the porters from eating snow, whose evil effects upon the system he well knew.

Up the ice-falls, choked with massive translucent hulks, they pushed on until they were again on smooth snow. Camp III was found with difficulty in a billowing mist. Next day Schneider and Aschenbrenner went ahead to stamp out a route up the smooth but arduous slopes to establish Camp IV.

On June 25th the party was in occupation of this new camp, which was on a snow-covered plateau of ice some distance below the precipice of the Rakhiot Peak,

the rock mass which was their way on to the higher ridges.

So far the weather, considering that this was the Himalaya, had been comparatively amiable ; but on the following day an attempt to establish a higher camp was frustrated by mist, and a second attempt three days later also came to nothing.

Meanwhile the second attacking party, led by Wieland, arrived with porters and loads to join the first.

At length the mists dispersed and it became possible to press on again. There was hard work before them now, for the route over the Rakhiot Peak was very steep and lay over exposed rock. Nails would have to be driven into the face to carry ropes to support the laden porters, and there were ice-slabs in which footholds would require to be cut. Dr. Bernard, with a strong sense of responsibility for all their lives, made them promise not to overstrain themselves.

"And don't," he enjoined, "go any farther than the last point from which you can make your way back" : a sound law of mountaineering, especially in the Himalaya, where neither mountains nor weathers have any mercy for the foolhardy.

Bernard and Mülritter (who was feeling the strain of altitude) were to remain at Camp IV as support party.

"We'll put up the next camp under the Rakhiot," Merkl told them. "Follow us up to the higher camps with provisions as soon as you can."

Refreshed by their enforced rest, the climbers soon had Camp V established and provisioned. Now the Rakhiot face, a grand precipice of sound rock, picked almost clean of snow, confronted them : real climbing at last.

For several days they toiled on the Rakhiot, clinging crazily with a couple of fingers while they hammered

in the pitons and exulted in the sensation of tackling a solid adversary. Willi Welzenbach in especial was tireless ; and, disdaining gloves, he risked frostbite with what seemed to the others uncanny impunity. Before nightfall they had strung up six hundred feet of rope on the cliff.

On July 4th the climbers and porters made the ascent of the Rakhiot. The porters bore themselves on the precipice with admirable confidence, laden as they were. But progress was far from rapid. Halts for breath were frequent. After rounding a bad pitch where the cliff was more than normally sheer and the steps were cut small in snow slabbed in crevices, they came upon the snow ridge where the sixth camp was to be established. At this exposed height (nearly 23,000 feet) it was piercingly cold ; clouds had covered the sun, and dank mists were boiling up from the lower slopes of the mountain. But barely had the porters unpacked the baggage from their backs when the clouds sundered, light poured down, and there before them, brilliant and sharp, stretched the snow-clad backbone of rock which led to the Silbersattel, their route to the summit.

As they stood gazing summitwards, they had on their left the south buttress of Nanga Parbat, descending in an appalling, almost vertical plunge of 17,000 feet. Beyond and around was a concourse of silver mountains, fantastic, unearthly and grand, with the citadel of Mount Godwin-Austen ("K2") jutting out imperiously in full sunlight.

Forgetting the cold and their own weariness, they gazed their fill, but presently practical matters claimed their attention. Some of the porters were off colour, and had to rest ; the others busied themselves in shovelling out the snow and setting up the tents. Everyone who was fit worked with a will, with triumph and

fatigue mingling in his being. Night came on. Well fed and warm, they settled into their sleeping-sacks and lay listening to the avalanches which volleyed in the frosty silence, as if the mountain were collapsing upon its foundations.

Next morning three of the porters were so faint with mountain sickness that they had to be sent down. The rest of the party pushed on. Wieland and Welzenbach went ahead, cutting steps in the ice over the Moor's Head, a tower of rock which blocked their path. Ice-plastered and slippery, and flanked on either side by chaotic precipices, the ridge switchbacked up and down, and in one place there was a drop of four hundred feet of polished ice. As mountaineers they found it delectably dangerous. Hour after hour they laboured, chipping little down-sloping steps into the ice, until their arms ached and sweat coursed down their faces. Milk-white clouds surged over the mountain, but above them the sun shone intensely, burning into the backs of their necks and causing dizzy headaches.

Late in the afternoon, when the rising clouds indicated that the clear weather on the ridge would soon be swallowed up, they stopped to wait for the others. They were on a broad natural platform under the steep snow-slope which led to the Silbersattel, a curved terrace linking the twin hummocks of the east peaks. The snow where they stood had been moulded by wind into eccentric swirls and billows.

That evening everybody was dog-tired; weary in spirit and body. The setting up of the tents was a feat of will-power. They ate little. They had none of the joy which had possessed them the previous night: it seemed that in drawing near to the attainment of their goal they had exhausted the capacity to appreciate it. Wieland and Welzenbach were breathing badly. It was

so cold that even their sleeping-sacks afforded scant comfort. They tossed and turned restlessly, jerking against each other in their cramped quarters. Tempers suffered. Welzenbach alone remained cheerful, and sat up all night writing up his diary by the light of a flickering candle.

Waiting—waiting. . . .

The night seemed eternities long.

When dawn came they were stiff and unrefreshed. In the small storm-tent Aschenbrenner and Schneider had fared even worse than the others.

Tundu and Nurbu, two of the porters, were exhausted and vomited repeatedly. It was plain that they could go no farther.

“ Someone will have to take them down,” Merkl said. “ They’ll never get back otherwise. They are too far gone.”

The Sahibs looked at each other. Stale as they were, not one wanted to go back now that the summit was almost within their grasp.

Bechtold gazed up at the Silbersattel, blue and silver in the spotless morning light. He sighed.

“ I’ll take them,” he said.

The others clasped his hand in turn. There were brief farewells.

“ Take care of yourself,” Merkl said.

“ And you, Willy.”

“ Don’t scoff all the grub down there,” Welzenbach pleaded. “ We’ll be entitled to a good tuck-in when we get down.”

“ Rather. Enjoy yourselves, you lucky blighters.”

“ You bet.”

So they parted.

Bechtold’s descent with the two porters was like a bad dream. Both men were utterly spent. Their

weariness was not merely physical. Their spirit was broken. No man can endure beyond the limit of his will and strength, and these men, without the consuming ambition of the Sahibs to nourish their courage, had endured the hardships of this grim mountain uncomplainingly. Bechtold felt towards them an almost paternal responsibility. They walked as though in sleep, seeming to hear and see nothing. It was hours before they reached the Rakhiot. (Once he looked back and saw, with mingled joy and envy, his comrades ascending on to the Silbersattel.) One of the porters fell on a steep ice-wall ; the other porter clutched him in the nick of time and somehow managed to hold him. It was a near thing, and both men evinced still greater reluctance to advance. Of the Rakhiot they were terrified, but somehow Bechtold cajoled them on to the ropes. He was weary himself by this time. Of Camp V they found nothing but the tops of the tents : a blizzard had buried everything else. There was nothing for it but to push on to Camp IV. They had not gone far when a stinging dense snow started to whirl in their faces. Soon the wind became so strong that they could barely stand upright. They could not see for more than a few yards, the old tracks were obliterated, and ever and again they lost their way and wasted time and strength in finding it again. Darkness began to settle. Bechtold knew only too well what it would mean to fail to find the camp. He was exhausted and cold, but within him there burned an intense, compulsive thought :

“ Our lives are in danger.”

One of the porters sagged to his knees and crumpled forward on his face. Instantly Bechtold shook him.

“ Come on ! ” he urged.

The man was in a daze. “ I can’t go on,” he mumbled.

The effort of articulating the words seemed to drain the last drop of energy from him.

" You can. You *can*, do you hear ? We are almost there."

It was a conflict of wills. The porter's eyes had closed. Bechtold dug his fingers into his shoulder with all his force. The pain penetrated to the man's exhausted brain. He moaned. Bechtold grasped him again, even harder. The man dragged himself to his feet. He stumbled forward.

A minute later the other man also fell, but he too managed to muster up the strength to go on. All three were on the verge of collapse, and Bechtold knew that each stop meant cutting the margin of safety finer.

Though he had little hope of being heard, he started to shout.

" Come on," he said to the porters, " yell ! " But a husky croak was the most they could produce. Presently he heard a faint cry in return.

He shouted louder. Then, faintly through the thick rushing snow, he saw two figures approaching up the slope. In a moment he recognized them.

" Mülritter ! " he yelled. " Bernard ! "

" Fritz, what's the matter ? "

" Look after the porters. *I'm* all right."

One glance at the porters' faces was enough.

" Quick ! " said Doctor Bernard. They half led, half dragged the porters to the tent, where they promptly sank into a coma from which it took days for their recovery. Their hands and feet had to be chafed with snow for hours on end to relieve frostbite.

A meal and the comforting warmth of the tent quickly restored Bechtold's spirits.

" To-morrow," he said, " they will be at the summit.

Perhaps to-day. They had reached the Silbersattel hours ago."

"We have had blizzards all the time," Mülritter told him. "And fogs like pea soup. We were anxious about you. Is it clear up there?"

"Marvellously! They can't fail."

"Splendid!"

In mountaineering, particularly in the Himalaya, the one incalculable and all-powerful force to be contended with is weather. Aschenbrenner and Schneider, as they led the way up on to the Silbersattel, well knew that with the summit "in the bag," a storm or blizzard might snatch it from them. So far their advance from Camp V had been comparatively fortunate; and so pure and serene was the morning that they had every hope of making an easy conquest of the summit. Severe as the step-cutting was at such an altitude, they made gratifying progress. At last, with a gasp of delight, they pulled themselves up on to the saddle. There was nothing between them and the summit but a good sharp walk.

"The Silbersattel at last!" they shouted, and shook each other's shoulders delightedly. They felt little fatigue now, and scarcely noticed even the edgy north-east wind, such was their joy and optimism.

Aschenbrenner was kicking up the snow. "Feel it," he said. "It's wind-bitten. None of that loose floury stuff. It will make easy going."

"Rather! The worst is over now—though at the moment I feel I never want to handle an ice axe again. We've got old Nanga Parbat licked."

Sheltered under some rocks, they lit cigarettes and sat luxuriously watching the eddies of tobacco smoke dissolve in the sparkling air; and presently Merkl, Wieland and the others overtook them. No sooner had

they exchanged greetings than, without warning, literally "out of the blue," the wind rushed towards them in a shrilling gale.

"It's too late to reach the summit and return," declared Merkl, swaying with his back to the wind. "And anyhow, we shouldn't stand a chance in this gale."

"Shall we get off the saddle, then?"

"No. We'll chance camping here. We'll strike the summit in the morning."

"I don't like the look of the weather," Wieland remarked doubtfully.

"Nor do I. But it's all a gamble."

So the tents were pegged in, and with some difficulty they prepared soup and settled down for the night. But there was little repose for them. Their position was terribly exposed. The wind worried their tiny tents like a dog worrying a bone. Snow sifted in through every crack. They shivered as they had never shivered before, even on Nanga Parbat; and it seemed to them that compared with this the cold of the Alps was negligible.

One of the tents fell in, and only after hours of desperate struggle was it secured again. Nanga Parbat, beaten back to its last defences, was putting up a vicious fight.

All next day they remained in the tents, chafing with impatience but knowing that such a hurricane rendered any progress towards the summit unthinkable. In such conditions it was difficult to prepare even the scantiest meal; moreover, they had brought only sufficient food for a rapid dash to and from the summit. The cookers would not work. In trying to force solids down their throats they were sick. They could do no more than moisten their stiff mouths with a little snow.

The following morning showed no improvement in the weather. At a height of 25,000 feet they were only a

two or three hours' tramp from the summit ; yet into each man's heart was creeping the dreary realization that they had failed.

"There's nothing for it," said Merkl with his usual forthrightness, "we ought to get down to the lower camps."

"You don't think we could risk another day and have a smack at the summit ?" Schneider asked wistfully.

"Emphatically not. We have the porters as well as ourselves to consider, and they are jiggered already."

The others concurred.

So, staggering in the barrage of the gale, they packed up the storm-torn tents and the retreat from the saddle commenced. Schneider and Aschenbrenner led. With three porters—Pinzo Nurbu, Nima Dorje and Pasang—they roped and were soon on the slope where they had cut steps two days before. The mist surged about them in palpable sodden masses, catching in their throats and soaking through their heavy climbing kit. Below and above, the mountain was obscured : they had the eerie sensation of clinging to a tilted platform in space. The perpetual driftage and consolidation of snow had filled in the steps they had cut. That meant fresh cutting—hard work at any time, trebly hard now, when the low temperature caused the fires of energy to sink. So powerful was the gale that once Nima Dorje was wrenched from his hold and dangled on the rope, and it was only by a superhuman effort that the others held him. Exasperatingly they kept losing their direction.

Schneider said :

"This is rotten on the porters, wasting energy in detours. Let's unrope. We can do that safely now that we are off the slope."

When they had unroped, he admonished the porters :

"Stick with us as close as you can. It's all too easy

to get lost in this smother. If you lose sight of us for a single moment, yell at the tops of your voices. Got that?"

"Yes, Sahib," replied Pasang, who was much the fittest of the three.

"Come on now, in a line."

"The second party are progressing well," said Aschenbrenner, who was gazing backward towards the saddle. The clouds had momentarily parted, and the descending figures showed up clearly.

"Good old Willy! They'll get down right enough."

In the gloom of the whirling snow, Schneider and Aschenbrenner battled onward along the ridge. Soon they were hungry and aching, bone-frozen, and so utterly flogged that the effort of movement became almost too much to endure. They passed Camps VII and VI. Then Aschenbrenner, who was in front, turned and shouted above the noise of the wind:

"Where are the porters?"

"Eh?"

"The porters—where are they?"

"I saw them a few minutes ago. Surely they haven't wandered off?"

They called: "Coo-ee! Coo-ee!"

No answer.

"I can't see a thing," Aschenbrenner said. "I suppose they are following somewhere."

"Any chance of rounding them up, do you think?"

Aschenbrenner shook his head. "Not a hope in this wretched soup. Perhaps Merkl's lot will overtake them."

"I hope so."

The temperature went on dropping until the cold was like a breath out of the solitudes of interstellar space. Snow adhered to their clothing, and ere long they were encased in a hard crackling armour. Each had a chan-

delier of ice dangling from his beard. But on they went. They had to go on. Trudge, trudge, trudge. Snow sucking at boots, clinging to knees. Each step a toil. Lungs bursting. Sour taste in mouth. Halt for breath, lean on ice axe, head bowed to the tempest. Deep gasps. Must go on, maintain the rhythm. Keep together. Bodies moving like machines : feelingless as logs, yet moving. Mind that rock : glazed, slippery. No, hallucination, revenge of overstretched nerves. Keep going, keep going. Flying snow gets in through sides of goggles, jags like glass splinters. Night approaching, shadows welling up the slopes, precipices blotted. Witch-draperies of snow and ice fragments swirling up. Wind . . . *whee-ee-ee!* . . . howling down chasm and couloir. Staggering . . . Keep going. Human wills guttering to a numb point of flame. The camp—food, warmth, well-being, *sleep!*—infinities away. Shall never do it. What does it matter? Nothing matters. But must do it, must, **MUST**. Queerly goggled, huge-booted, slow and clumsy in their thick suitings, they look, in this primal desolation, like Selenites, crouched unhuman things, creatures out of nightmare. Frail beings, weak, hungry, helpless, hopeless, grappling with the forces of destruction. Downward, over rock, ice-slag, temperamental snow-slope (*careful!*) . . . teeth clenched . . . slipping, swaying, recovering . . . ever downward. They do not speak; they need every ounce of breath to keep their starved bodies alive and moving; the bond between them is wordless, deeply felt, sustaining. . . .

By luck and the habit of mountain craft which never deserts a climber, they traversed the Rakhiot without mishap.

They sat down in the shelter of a rock for a while. Immediately their heads lolled stupidly. They jerked to their feet. Schneider said through chattering teeth :

"Can we do it, do you think?"

"I don't know," Aschenbrenner confessed. "This cold . . . it takes the marrow out of you. I feel I hardly care whether we reach the camp or not. Have you any food left?"

"No."

"Nothing at all?"

"No. I've searched the pack."

"I hope Willy's safe."

"He can't be far behind us. Let's push on to Camp V."

They found Camp V almost engulfed in snow-drift. Digging and clawing, they got into one of the tents and found provisions. After a meal they felt stronger, and went on with a new optimism.

At seven in the evening they arrived at Camp IV. They sagged down, so done up that their packs had to be unstrapped for them.

"Here, drink this," Bechtold said.

"Hot tea!" Schneider gloated. "I've never needed it so much. You *are* a jewel, Fritz."

They drank gluttonously, and soon a drowsy warmth crept through their veins.

"We didn't bag the summit," they said.

"The weather beat you, then?"

"Absolutely beat us, right on the last lap. Maddening."

Bechtold and Bernard clucked sympathetically.

"What about the others?" enquired Mürlitter.

"They are following. They will be here any minute. Wieland's not in good trim, though."

More tea was quickly brewed: the men returning from the mountain would need something to warm them. But no one arrived. The tea went cold. They made more and that too went cold. The minutes grew to hours. Outside the tent, nothing could be distinguished

in the dusk. They shouted, but the only answer was the echoing thunder of the wind.

That night Mülritter, Bernard, Bechtold, Aschenbrenner and Schneider lay listening to the uproar of the storm, thinking of their comrades and porters, dejectedly wondering what was happening to them; and though they would not confess it, each man was racked with foreboding.

Merkl, Welzenbach and Wieland never returned. Five porters—Pasang, Kitar, Da Tundu, Kikuli and Angtsering—weak and frostbitten, succeeded in reaching Camp IV. Kikuli had fallen down an ice-wall and was in terrible pain. It is from their halting accounts that the fate of the stranded men can be pieced together.

The second party was delayed by sickness in descending from the Silbersattel. When they reached level ground darkness was approaching. Wieland was obviously in distress. Their desperate need was to reach Camp VII, which they hoped would still be standing. But Wieland could not be left. Merkl himself might have got through. But loyalty to a comrade came first. There was nothing for it but to stop and try to get some rest.

To sleep without a tent at 23,000 feet, in such weather, was perhaps the ghastliest experience that ever befell a mountaineer. What made matters worse was that they were one sleeping-bag short. Poor Welzenbach insisted on going without, and that night he lay only on a groundsheet, flogged by the wind, his pillow the frozen snow.

Dawn came as an ashen light filtering through the blankets of mist. They struggled on. Wieland fell behind. They never saw him again. They knew what had happened to him. Then Nima Nurbu, the porter, fell down and died. The snow had piled so deep that

they sank in it to the waist. The cold seemed to hold them in an icy embrace. With unutterable stress and toil they fought their way to Camp VII. They crawled into the tent. Welzenbach immediately collapsed. No efforts could rouse him, and that night his ravaged spirit found its last rest.

Merkl, the only remaining Sahib, stayed the night at the camp with two porters, Gay-Lay and Angtsering. He had not eaten for three days. He was badly frost-bitten. In the morning he could only hobble along, supported by two ice axes, with Gay-Lay assisting him. The mountain was at its most inhospitable, and the gale, howling and thrashing the snow off the rocks in towering spirals, was devilry incarnate. He must have known by now that the sinister fate which presided over his expedition required one more sacrifice: his own. As it was beyond his strength to reach Camp VI, Gay-Lay helped him to scoop out a cave in the ice, and here they lay down together on a single ground-sheet. Angtsering went on.

Gay-Lay was less weak than his master, and could perhaps have made the descent. But he chose to stay with the Sahib, and by that act of self-sacrifice made his name imperishable in mountaineering history.

The men at Camp IV could do nothing but wait, stupefied with inactivity, craving for a break in the weather. But the snow fell unceasingly, malignly blotting out the world. No one attempted to sleep.

At length Aschenbrenner could bear it no longer.

"I'm going to try to reach them," he said.

"It can't be done," Bechtold said soberly. "The snow is thicker than ever. It's no good throwing your life away, old fellow. Things are bad enough, God knows."

But Aschenbrenner was already stuffing provisions into his pack. There was a strange light in his eyes.

"I'm going all the same," he declared grimly. "It might be possible to get food to them at least. Do you think Willy Merkl would hang about doing nothing if *we* were up there?"

Schneider jumped up. "I'm coming with you."

"As your doctor I should forbid both of you to go," Bernard said worriedly. "Neither of you is fit. But I do appeal to you not to overstrain yourselves. Remember that you've got the return journey to make as well."

"We'll be careful. Ready, Schneider?"

The newly fallen snow lay deep and uncompacted. They sank into it; it clung to their knees: each step meant dragging a leg out of the sucking drift: aggravating treadmill work. Frequently they slipped. At any moment they expected an avalanche. The wind slashed at their faces like a flail, almost buffeted them off their feet. They plodded without speaking. They became automata. They lost count of time. Hours passed, and only a few hundred feet had been covered. Aschenbrenner stopped and gazed back at the deep irregular trench that was their track up the slope.

"I'm whacked," he said, leaning on his ice axe and breathing hard.

"We both are," Schneider said.

"I knew it was no good."

"Of course. But what else could we do?"

"We'd better get back while we have strength left."

Wearily: "I suppose so."

They gazed upward for a while, awed and repelled. Blizzard-swept Nanga Parbat was a shrine of impenetrable mystery. They had thought it beautiful: where was its beauty now? No! That beauty was a delusion, a figment of their diseased imaginations. Callous, barren, hag-hearted, the mountain was eating into their bones, draining their vitality, poisoning the youth in their

hearts. Up there, forsaken in their direst need, their comrades were engaged in a laocoön struggle with the forces of nature. All the science, sympathy, courage and vaunted resource of mankind was powerless to aid them. Earth had forged their sinews, fed and clothed them, smitten their will to a fine edge—but earth was master yet. In this last stronghold of chaos she taught them the measure of their puniness.

That evening the wind dropped and a silence reigned over the mountain. The party were sitting, each busy with his thoughts, when Mülritter jumped to his feet.

“What was that?” he jerked out.

“What?”

“I thought I heard a voice. Nerves, I suppose.”

“There *is* a voice!” Bernard exclaimed. They dashed outside.

They heard the voice plainly now, though no words could be distinguished. Bechtold was straining his eyes towards the ridge, which was steeped in a wild, brilliant glow.

“Look up there,” he pointed. “Isn’t that a figure?”

“No, it’s a rock.”

“No it isn’t,” Mülritter said. “It’s someone waving!”

They scrutinized the ridge through glasses.

“Who is it—Willy or Gay-Lay?”

But they could not recognize the figure at that distance. Presently it disappeared.

“Nothing will ever help them now,” Bernard said quietly.

They heard the voice once more. Then it was stilled. The upper ridges were forsaken. The mountain had recovered its inviolacy.

The weather continuing to be stormy, it became obvious that a further attack on the summit was impracticable,

and at the end of July the survivors packed up the tents and made their way back to the Base. Heavy-hearted, they looked back frequently at the mountain. As if in mockery, Nanga Parbat threw off its mist swathings, stood grandly pitiless ; detached from all the petty futile aspirations of man. They thought of the four comrades and six porters whose bodies for ever shared with Mum-
mery's that snowy bier. Then they turned their faces away, for before them, so lovely that it was as though they had never seen them before, were the meadows, full of flowers, and the birch-trees putting forth their leaf, and the streams babbling by Drexel's grave.

CHAPTER IX

CONCLUSION

OTHER peaks fall, but the Goddess Mother remains unvanquished. Five times have men hurled against her the force of their will, have cannily sought out the breaches in her armour, besieged her from advance camps, come thrillingly near to "wringing her top-knot" as one of the climbers expressed it. Vast sums of money have been spent (an Everest expedition costs £5,000 or more), human lives have been gambled and, alas ! have been sacrificed. Loss of life, loss of time, loss of money : is it worth it ?

No, delcares the sceptic.

Yes, declares the mountaineer.

The likelihood is that the mountaineer is right. The practical results alone are substantial enough to justify the expeditions. Their extensive and detailed surveys of Everest and its radiating valleys have enriched geographical knowledge ; (most of the mountain ranges of the world have been mapped in the first place by mountaineers.) The fragments of rock specimens brought back by Odell and others, meaningless to the layman, are to the geologists eloquent records of past ages—"sermons in stones." Natural history has profited by the specimens of flora and wild life collected on the expeditions ; and there are other practical gains which, though they do not come within the province of this narrative, are of very considerable worth.

Perhaps most significant of all the verifiable results of the Everest expeditions is the light they have thrown upon the vexed question of acclimatization. In this they have made a real contribution to physiological science—a contribution, perhaps, whose moment has not

yet been fully realized. Prior to the expeditions informed medical opinion was emphatic that at 23,000 or 24,000 feet the effort of nourishing the lungs on such tenuous air would cause *progressive* physical and mental deterioration. The longer men remained at such heights, the poorer would be their physical condition. At, say, 28,000 feet breathing would become impossible and death would occur. The reverse has proved to be the case. In 1924 Odell, who took little active part in the early stages of the climbing and so had opportunity to acclimatize comfortably, climbed twice up to Camp VI in three days. In the early days of each assault the ascent of the ice-cliff was a dementia of toil and strain, yet after a few days not only climbers but heavily laden porters were ascending and descending quite comfortably. The fact is, that in the long pageant of time the human race is still in its infancy, the range and resources of the human organism are still virtually unexplored. The Everest expeditions, in establishing the principle of the body's reduplication of blood corpuscles at five miles above sea level, have opened up fascinating possibilities.

But in the long run it is not by practical benefits that the expeditions stand justified. They have given to the world something infinitely more important: fresh evidence of the dignity and force of the human spirit. It was that spirit, not the mere efficiency of a machine, that saved Clydesdale when the down-draught caught him. It was that spirit, not a mere flow of oxygen gas, that saved Finch and Bruce when the cylinders ceased to function. It was that spirit, and that spirit alone, which enabled Somervell and Mallory to carry out their glorious rescue of the porters on the ice-cliff. No travail can weaken it. Self-doubt cannot mar it. It rises supreme above every obstacle. How shall we, reading of them in the comfort of our firesides, ever appreciate

the hardships of Everest climbing ? The flaying wind, the numbing cold, the agony of frostbite and blindness, the discomfort of heavy clothes that could not be taken off for weeks on end, the monotonous food, the decline of physical and mental "spring" caused by altitude—we need to stretch our imaginations to the utmost to enter into such things. No man is ever the same after he has done battle with Everest. Morshead lost fingers, others contracted weak hearts. Somervell's health was grievously impaired after his fine climb of 1924. Speaking of the paroxysm of coughing which overcame him at 24,000 feet he says, "So I sat down to die whilst Norton walked on"; and the austere simplicity of the remark reflects a quality which all the climbers shared, and which was sharpened by the challenge of Everest.

"Had we vanquished an enemy? None but ourselves," Mallory once wrote in describing an Alpine climb. Self-mastery as learnt in the hard school of the Himalaya is an achievement that transcends the conquest of the mountains themselves. Amundsen confessed that when he reached the South Pole he wondered whether the end was worth so much drudgery; so do Everest climbers, on reaching the demoralizing atmosphere of the higher levels, find the driving power of their ideal slipping away from them; and it is then that the final effort is demanded of them, a conquest of themselves, the determination to go on when the goal no longer seems worth having. One can dimly imagine the feelings of Norton and Smythe, grimly battering their way onward into a desolation a thousand times intensified by the absence of a companion. At such times a man feels the power of a mountain as a physical evil, the inheritance of primitive dread of the unknown sweeps over him, and the superstitions of the plainsmen become less hard to accept. Yet such men fight on, and one can but salute them.

And how we shall salute the ultimate victor ! His success will be no fluke, no fruit of rash impulse, but the predestined result of a process, a success reared upon foundations well and truly laid down. Such a victory will come only to the man with the right physical and mental qualifications. What manner of man he will be is not difficult to guess. He must be solid but wiry ; quick to think and quick to act. He must be at the precise age when the enthusiasm of youth is salted with the caution that belongs to maturity ; must combine high courage with tenacity of will ; must be as versatile as a diplomat and consistent as tempered steel ; with that Damocles sword of avalanche hanging over his head, he must have the imagination to anticipate accidents, and yet not allow imagination to affect his nerve ; he must have the ability to work out detailed plans plus the willingness to scrap those plans when events dictate. The gift of comradeship must be his, and modesty, and the capacity to sink, without question, all personal considerations in the common purpose. And lastly he must have a devotion to the ideal of the enterprise, that love of mountains without which any climbing undertaking is a burden upon flesh and spirit.

That man will subdue Everest. We do not know when. In five years, ten years, fifty years, perhaps. But the certainty is there. He will subdue Everest. For Everest is at the end of her resources. She cannot heap upon man's head greater misfortunes than he has already suffered at her hands. She is cruel, but even her cruelty has its limits. She is subtle, but only up to a point. She cannot change her tactics. She cannot adapt herself. She cannot forge fresh weapons. But man can. It is in his power to devise new strategies, new methods, new implements, to learn from his setbacks and draw strength and confidence from his triumphs. His mind is nimble,

he has learnt when to strike and when to withdraw, his body can modify its processes to conditions. Man will never allow nature to worst him. Puny he may be beside this armoured adversary, but his stature is no matter of cubits. Already he has come within an ace of success, has stood under the ultimate tip of Everest, the prize which he had only to stretch out his hand to grasp. He was incapable of that crowning effort. But some day it will be made. Some day he will stand—dazed, sick, exhausted yet exultant—with the whole of the great world beneath his feet. Man will then have made the greatest of his physical conquests over nature.

But will his restless spirit be satisfied ?

EPILOGUE

Our peace is broken, say the blue moths,
Circling with swirl and sweep.

What marauders, says the Attid spider,
Break on our winter sleep?

The chough to his cliff-nurseried brood,
Pecking snow from his wings,

*Whence come these troops of loud ungainly
Goblin-goggled things?*

Back! shrill the Valkyrs on the wind ;
Back! the snow and mist.

Snarls the avalanche, *Not this way!*
And strikes with icy fist.

But yet, storm-hounded, their will is founded
Deeper than mountain walls,

Who come to wrestle with the gods
Until the fortress falls.

POSTSCRIPT

SINCE the publication of the first edition of this book another expedition to Everest has been defeated. This, counting a reconnaissance early in 1933, was the seventh expedition to approach Everest, and the fifth to attempt the mountain. Great hopes were entertained of its success. W. H. Tilman, the leader, pinned his faith upon a small party. There is undoubtedly much to be said for his view. Admittedly a small force lacks reserves of strength. But on the other hand it can more effectively turn to advantage some unexpected windfall of weather or climbing conditions. In his classic conquest of Kamet Frank Smythe crowned a chess-like series of strategic movements by a dramatic summit dash and, with all his plans in the melting pot, pulled it off ; and the same mountain almost fell again when last year a party of British soldiers, most of them deficient of mountain craft, adopted similar shock tactics. But whether such methods, effective enough against peaks of 25-26,000 feet, would succeed on Everest, where the capital difficulties only start at this height, remains to be seen.

The 1938 party numbered seven. All were climbers. Even the doctor was there primarily in a mountaineering rather than a specialist capacity. Botanizing and geologizing were to be eschewed : all that sort of thing had already been done. No wireless apparatus was taken. Deference to tradition was however maintained by the taking of oxygen for use on the final stages of the climb. In addition to Tilman the personnel consisted of N. E. Odell, who in 1924 climbed twice to Camp VI ; P. R. Oliver, whose neck-or-nothing ascent of Trisul with a single Garwhali porter in 1933 marked him out as a

climber rich in enterprise and daring ; E. E. Shipton, fresh from a brilliant expedition to the Karakorams with Tilman ; F. S. Smythe ; Peter Lloyd, who had many Alpine guideless climbs under his belt ; and Dr. C. B. W. Warren, who went to Everest in 1936. A vintage team.

The expedition started from Darjeeling in February 1938. As in previous transactions with Everest a Base Camp was set up near the junction of the main and East Rongbuk glaciers. Early in April Camp III was established near the snout of the East Rongbuk Glacier. Progress had been steady and up to schedule ; acclimatization was at work. But Everest, never distinguished for the social graces, was in what a climber described as her "deuced ungrateful" mood. Violent wind and low temperatures peremptorily forbade a footing on the mountain. The ice-cliff to the North Col looked singularly uninviting. It is one of the disgruntling things about Everest that the ice-cliff lacks the decent habit of stability which one expects of natural scenery : erosion, frost and avalanche are the demolition contractors of Everest. Each expedition wastes a valuable slice of its time in groping a line to the ridge. Maps and diagrams from previous reconnaissances are useless. In 1938 the slopes were a chaos of heaped and riven ice. Still the eye of faith, which is the mountaineer's special attribute, discerned a faintly plausible line of approach to the Col. All that was required was a day or two of good weather. But the monsoon had arrived unbelievably early. There was no point in hanging about. The climbers were afflicted with coughs and sore throats ; with such weapons do the Himalayas fight their adversaries, casting about them a subtle miasma of ill-health. There was nothing for it but a retirement to the Kharta Valley.

Toward the end of May Camp III was again occupied,

and provisioned as an advanced base of operations. The wind had dropped: a factor welcome enough from the point of view of present amenities, but unwelcome in that without the besom of a stiff wind the snow would make itself at home on the rocks and hinder climbing. On May 26th Tilman and Oliver essayed the Col slopes, and aroused Everest to one of her characteristic misdemeanours. The slopes were covered with recent snow: it could not have looked deciduous, or the experienced Tilman would not have provoked it. Tilman was leading when an avalanche started. Oliver and two porters were flicked off their feet as if they had been breadcrumbs; but by good hap the rope held and a disaster to the whole party was narrowly averted. But all that day Everest throbbed and thundered with avalanches.

There followed heroic endeavour and frustration. The ice-cliff was overcome and a solid foundation laid for the camp again. But though a camp was run up it was useless to garrison it, for the incessant snow had heaped the rocks above the Col to waist-depth. In such conditions, in which even an Alpine peak would be left severely alone, Everest is definitely and hopelessly out of the question. But on June 5th Camp IV, on the Col, was again occupied, a route having been forced from the west side, *via* the ice-fall which Mallory and Bullock had summarily rejected in 1921. Next day, in fairly good weather, Camp V was set up at 25,300 feet. On June 8th Shipton and Smythe established Camp VI at 27,000 feet. But now, alas, the monsoon struck with a vengeance: snow fell, the difficult rocks along the North Face were sprinkled with just enough snow to render purchase impossible. It was defeat, full and final. The evacuation commenced.

It has been suggested that the climbing of Everest

after the monsoon might be feasible. It is worth trying. There will be snow on the North Face. But the ridge route, which Mallory favoured, might "go." Once the two "Steps" are passed—and these are of exceptional severity—there appears to be nothing but an easy promenade to the summit; but, as always, the casting vote between success and failure lies with the weather. This last assault, with the accumulated experience of previous expeditions to go on, has got no further than did the party of 1922. It is disappointing; but such setbacks have to be expected; without them the game would lose half its savour, the ultimate triumph half its glory.

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INDEX

"Abode of Snow," 12
 "Abominable Snowmen," 18
 Abruzzi, Duke of, 9
 Air Ministry, 102
 Alpine Club, 24
 Angtsering, 131, 146-7
 Arun, River, 15, 23, 101
 Aschenbrenner, P., Chap. VIII
 Bauer, P., 113, 115-17
 Bechtold, F., Chap. VIII
 Beigel, 116
 Bengal, Bay of, 79
 Bernard, W., Chap. VIII
 Birnie, E. St. J., 79
 Blacker, L. V. S., Chap. VI
 Bonnett, S. R., Chap. VI
 Brahmaputra, River, 12, 16, 105
 British Garhwal, 119
 Brown, Graham, 125
 Bruce, C. G., 26, 58, 78, 120, 152
 Bruce, G., 3, Chaps. III-IV, 152
 Bullock, G., 33, 35, 38-9
 Bunji Plain, 129
 Bury, C. K. Howard, *see* Howard-Bury, C. K.
 Calcutta, 26
 Chomolhari, 29, 30, 126
 Chomolonzo, 38, 126
 Chomolungma, 14
 Chota Bursat, 29
 Crawford, C. G., 51
 Darjeeling, 26-9, 32, 34, 79, 129
 Delai Lama, 14, 20, 24, 33, 72
 Dorje, Nima, 142
 Douglas and Clydesdale, Marquess of, Chap. VI, 152
 Drexel, A., Chap. VIII
 Dyhrenfurth, Prof., 116-17
 East Rongbuk Glacier, 38, 64, 86
 Everest, 1-3, 7-9, 11-12, 14-15, 18, 20, 22, 23-5, Chaps. III-VI, 113, 115, 117, 124, 129, 150, 153-4
 Everest, Sir G., 14
Ever West, 109
 Face Edge, 39, 40
 Farmer, Dr., 113
 Fellowes, P. F. M., 103-4
 Finch, G., Chap. III, 152
 Fisher, A. L., 105
 "Five Treasures of the Snow," 112
 "Forbidden City," 21
 Gay-lay, 147
 Gaumont-British Film Corporation, 98
 "Goddess Mother," 28, 34, 72, 151
 "Goddess of the Snows," 14
 Godwin-Austen, 12, 135
 Gori Glacier, 119
 Gori River, 119
 Graham, 126
 Grand Lama, 21, 60
 Harris, W., Chap. V
 Harvard Mountaineering Club, 125
 Hazard, 61, 70, 73
 Hindston, R. W. G., 64
 Houston, Lady, 102-3, 106-7
 Howard-Bury, C. K., 18, 24-5, 29, 33
 "Inaccessible Mountain," 4
 India Office, 102
 Indus, River, 12
 Irvine, A., 42, Chap. IV, 83, 93, 125
 Jelap Pass, 30
 Jongpen, 33
 K2, *see* Godwin-Austen
 Kabru, 126
 Kama Valley, 38, 44
 Kamet, 3, 9, 79, 90, 126
 Kangchenjunga, 11-12, 18, 26-7, 29, 32, 67, 99, 103, 105, Chap. VII
 Karagorams, 9, 105, 126
 Kathgodam, 120
 Kellas, A. M., 22-3, 32-3, 93, 126
 Khamba Dzong, 32-3
 Kharta, 38
 Kikuli, 146
 Kitar, 146
 Knight, H., 18
 Krao-la Pass, 20
 Kuen Lung, 105

Lamas, 14, 17, 20, 25, 34, 109
 Lambton, Col., 13
 Langbu Pass, 11
 Leigh-Mallory, *see* Mallory, G. L.
 Lhasa, 20-1
 "Little Monsoon," 29
 Longland, J. L., 79, 83-4, 89
 Longstaff, T. G., 120, 126
 M'Intyre, D. F., Chap. VI
 Maharaja of Nepal, 102, 104
 Makalu, 38, 99, 103, 105-6
 Mallory, G. L., Chaps. III-IV, 78, 82, 83-4, 93, 100, 125-6, 152-3
 Merkl, W., Chap. VIII
 Milam Valley, 119
 Moor's Head, 136
 Morley, Lord, 23
 Morshead, H. T., Chap. III, 153
 "Mountain of Horror," 128
 Mount Everest Committee, 41
 Müllritter, P., Chap. VIII
 Mummery, A. F., 128, 150
 Nanda Devi, 79, Chap. VII
 Nanga Parbat, 89, 126, Chap. VIII
 Nepal, 7, Chap. II, 28-9, 94, 99, 102-3, 105
 Nepal, Maharaja of, 102, 104
 Noel, J. B. L., 3, 11, 22-3, 42, Chap. IV
 North Col, Chaps. III-V
 North Face, 50, 54, 57
 North Peak, 38
 North-East Ridge, 37, 39, 45, 84
 North-East Shoulder, 38-9, 46
 North-West Ridge, 37
 North-West Ridge (Kangchenjunga), 116
 Norton, E. F., Chaps. III-IV, 84, 88, 153
 Nurbu, 137
 Nurbu, Nima, 146
 Nurbu, Pinzo, 142
 Odell, N. E., 25, Chap. IV, 78, 125, 151-2
 Pasang, 142-3, 146
 "Peak XV," 13, 14
 Phari, 31, 74
 Potala Palace, 21
 "The Priest as wide as the Ocean," 14
 Purnea, 97, 101, 103
 Rakhiot Glacier, 129
 Rakhiot Peak, 133-5, 138, 144
 Ranjit River, 112
 Rhamani, River, 125-6
 Rishi Ganga, 120 *et seq.*, 123, 126
 Rongbuk Glacier, 36-8, 48, 81, 85
 Rongbuk Monastery, 34, 60, 80, 109
 Rongbuk Valley, 34, 42
 Royal Geographical Society, 23, 102
 Rutledge, H., Chap. V, 120
 Schaller, 118
 Schlagintweit Brothers, 9
 Schneider, E., Chap. VIII
 Shekar Dzong, 34
 Shipton, E., Chap. V., 120 *et seq.*
 Sikkim, 30, 33
 Silbersattel, 135-8, 140 *et seq.*, 146
 Siliguri, 26
 Smythe, F. S., 3, Chap. V, 110, 116-17, 126, 153
 "Snowmen," 110
 Somervell, T. H., Chaps. III-IV, 78, 84, 120, 126, 152-3
 South Peak, 100
 South Ridge (Nanda Devi), 125-6
 Tejbir, 48, 49-50
 Tibet, 7, Chap. II, 29, 30-2, 78, 109, 119
 Tilman, H. W., 120 *et seq.*
 Tok Tok La Pass, 23
 Trigonometrical Survey of India, 12
 Trisul, 126
 Tundu, 137
 Tundu, Da, 146
 Twins Glacier, 116
 Wager, L. R., Chap. V
 Welzenbach, W., Chap. VIII
 Wheeler, O. E., 35, 39
 Wieland, W., Chap. VIII
 Wilson, M., 105 *et seq.*
 Workmans, The, 9
 Younghusband, Sir, F. E., 20, 22, 24
 Zemu Glacier, 113

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